

SUDAN & NUBIA

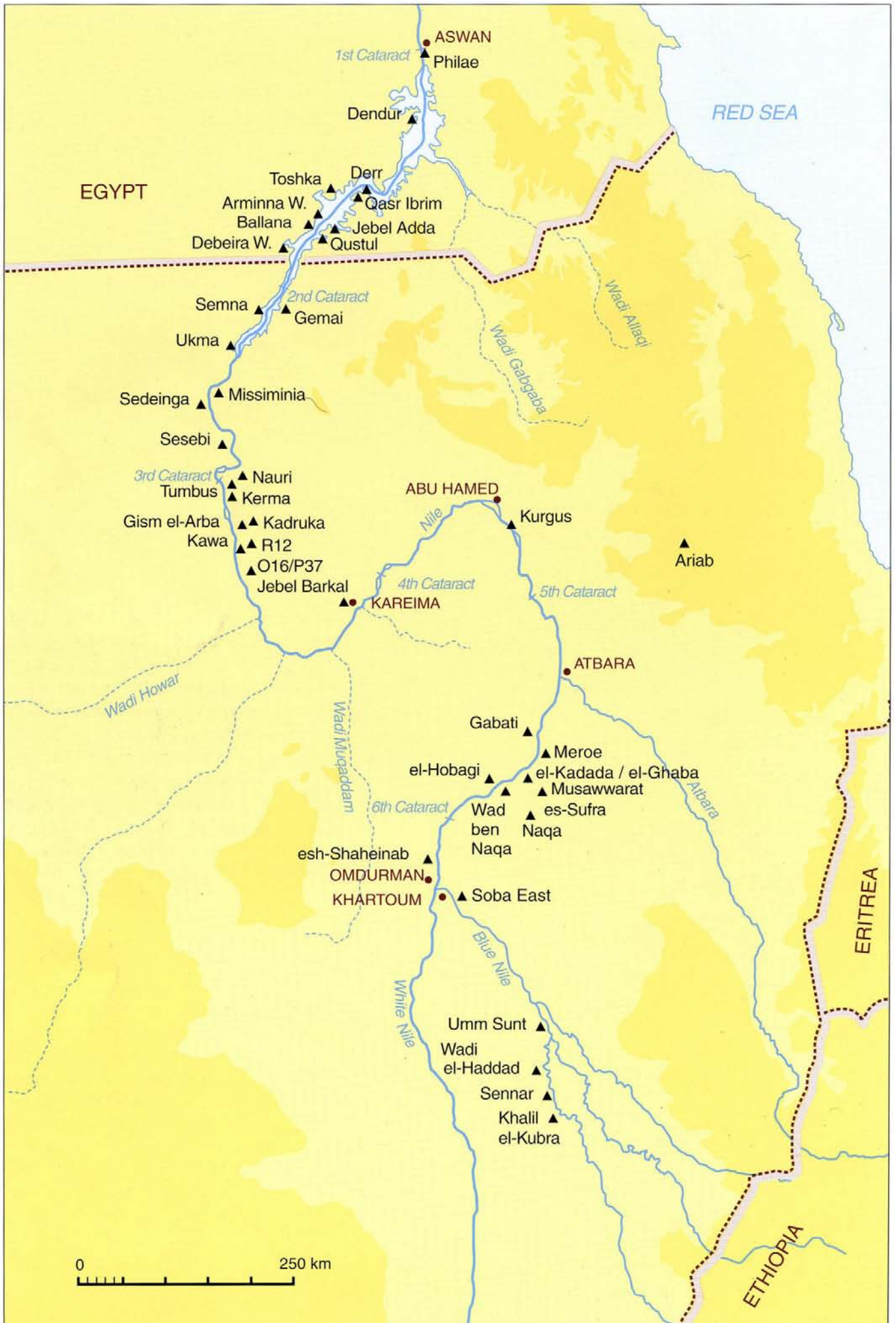
The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Bulletin No. 5

2001





SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Bulletin No. 5 2001

Contents

Introduction

Vivian Davies 1

Reports

Kadruka and the Neolithic in the Northern Dongola Reach 2
Jacques Reinold

First Season of Excavation at Site R12, a Late Neolithic Cemetery in the Northern Dongola Reach 11
Sandro Salvatori and Donatella Usai

Palaeotrauma: a profile of personal injury during the Kerma Period 21
Margaret Judd

Nubians at Hierakonpolis 29
Excavations in the Nubian Cemeteries
Renée Friedman

The Textiles from the Pan Grave Cemetery 38
Jana Jones

The Zooarchaeological Report 39
Salima Ikram

Pottery from the Nubian Cemeteries 40
Serena Giuliani

Kurgus 2000: The Egyptian Inscriptions 46
Vivian Davies

Excavations at Kurgus: The 2000 Season Results 59
Isabella Welsby Sjöström

Excavations within the Pharaonic and Kushite site at Kawa and in its hinterland, 2000-2001 64
Derek A. Welsby

Musawwarat es-Sufra 71
Interpreting the Great Enclosure
Steffen Wenig

Notes on the "non-sacred" parts of the Great Enclosure 87
Dieter Eigner

The Christianisation of Nubia: some archaeological pointers 89
David N. Edwards

Medieval Plant Economy in Middle Nubia: Preliminary Archaeobotanical Evidence from Nauri 97
Dorian Q Fuller and David N. Edwards

Miscellaneous 104

Front Cover: Beaker for funerary libation from el-Kadada, chalice shape, with incised geometric decoration, fired clay. Excavation n° KDD 76/3/59.

Introduction

Vivian Davies

The appearance of this, the fifth, issue of the Bulletin coincides with the tenth anniversary of our Society's founding. It has been an extraordinary first decade, remarkably productive in terms both of fieldwork and publication - one in which we have worked closely with our colleagues in the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums of the Sudan to fill gaps in the archaeological record and meet, wherever possible, the threats posed to archaeological sites by modern development. We have organized and supported eight major field-projects (in Soba East, the Northern Dongola Reach, Kawa, the Shendi-Atbara Reach, Gabati, the Bayuda Desert, the Fourth Cataract, and Kurgus) and published five memoirs (two others are in press at the time of writing), as well as *Sudan & Nubia*, an annual bulletin of reports 'fresh from the field'. Furthermore, we have held each year an international colloquium on current fieldwork and research, and we now additionally host the annual 'Kirwan Memorial Lecture', in memory of our distinguished first President.

The considerable funds needed to carry out this extensive programme have been forthcoming most substantially from the Bioanthropology Foundation and the British Museum, upon whose generosity we continue to rely, as we do also on that of the Society's individual Patrons. We intend to mark the Society's achievements with a special publication to be issued in the coming year. As to the future, the reports in this volume, on sites ranging in date from the Neolithic to the Mediaeval Period, amply demonstrate the huge potential for important new discoveries and scholarly progress in our area of interest, both in Sudan and Egypt, promising a second decade as exciting and rewarding as the first.

The Christianisation of Nubia: some archaeological pointers

David N. Edwards

The conversion of post-Meroitic Nubia to Christianity during the 6th century defines a major divide in Sudanese and Nubian archaeology and its study. However, despite the symbolic importance attached to the Christianisation of Nubia, study of the conversion process and its archaeological manifestations still remains limited. Such work as has been undertaken still remains structured, almost entirely, around the very limited historical sources. These have been used to create a narrative of the conversion of the Nubian kingdoms, beginning with the mission to Nobatia around AD 543 and ending around AD 580 with the conversion of Alodia (Vantini 1975, 7-27).

These sources provide us with benchmark 'events', but what they do not give us is any indication of conversion as a dynamic process nor indeed its progress over time. We know from Egypt, where our sources are much more abundant, that the spread of Christianity could be a slow and difficult process. There, the main period of progress seems to have been during the first half of the 5th century, but the pagan cults were often persistent and shrines are known to have survived late in the 5th century. Even in the immediate vicinity of Alexandria, with its powerful bishopric, we have an example of the worship of Isis continuing at the temple at Canopus-Menouthis in the late 480s (Trombley 1985, 219ff). On the Nubian frontier in the south, the Philae cults seem to have survived until the final suppression of the temple c. AD 537, even though an episcopate was established at Philae sometime before 425-450 (*op. cit.*, 236). Even the suppression of the Philae temples does not appear to have been the end of the story and there seem to be late pagan survivals in more isolated areas, such as some of the oases of the western desert, into the 6th and even 7th centuries (Rémondon 1952).

If we may allow that the history of Nubian conversion may also have been complex, attempts to move beyond the texts and the chronological framework they provide, have made relatively little progress. Kirwan, excavator of the burials of the last pagan rulers of Nobatia, in a number of papers drew attention to indications of an early presence of Christianity in the region, perhaps significantly before the 'official' conversion (e.g. Kirwan 1937, 1982, 1987). However, this 'official' narrative tends to remain central to all discussions of this period, even if it is often allowed that there may have been some penetration of Christianity before the official/royal conversion (e.g. Adams 2000, 102) that the texts are believed to record. In general, the conversion of Lower Nubia is portrayed as 'extremely rapid and thorough', a relatively unproblematic, and even 'inevitable' process (Adams

1977, 444-45) for which the historical texts provide the key chronological benchmark.

It is not proposed here to review the history and archaeology of the Christianisation of Nubia. Rather, it will be suggested that archaeological studies of the religious changes underway in this period may have greater potential than we suspect, and that archaeological evidence may throw light on some areas about which the historical sources tell us nothing. In particular, we may be able to begin to trace some of the dynamic character of religious change in the region and consider it as a process rather than an 'event'. If we begin to look more closely at the processes of Christianisation, we may also need to develop rather more complex approaches to the archaeology of this period which acknowledge the existence of complex and heterogeneous societies, with multi-layered identities on which the impact of Christianity may have been very variable. Outside the narrow confines of Lower Nubia we almost certainly need to take account of populations which included more mobile groups as well as settled riverine farmers, with far greater cultural divisions between the 'urban' centres and 'rural' areas. Where Christianity did take root, the conversion processes may also have seen significant local variations in beliefs and syncretic practices.

The Christianisation of Lower Nubia

The archaeological contribution to our understanding of the period of transition as yet remains limited and, with rare exceptions (e.g. Kirwan 1982, 1987), little interest has yet been shown in exploring the archaeological manifestations of Christianisation in more than a general way. The benchmark 'events' of the historical sources currently provide the pegs which fix archaeological chronologies, most importantly those based on ceramic developments in northern Nubia (Adams 1986, 604). In the absence of good external or absolute dates, the chronology of ceramics transitions from the 'X-Group' (N.II) to 'Christian' (N.III) ceramics depends on linkages with the date ascribed to the 'official' conversion of Lower Nubia. An especially important marker has been Adams' 'Transitional' Ware R2 which, in being almost entirely absent from pagan graves, was thought to be produced 'after, but only just after', the (historical) conversion, i.e. from c. AD 550 (1986, 604; 2000, 100).

While it has long been suggested that the processes of Christianisation in the north may have begun significantly before 550, possibly during the later 5th century, little significant progress has been made in this area (Török 1988: 69-73). Archaeological studies concerning the arrival of Christianity have tended to focus on three main indicators, in the first instance, markers of religious affiliation, the appearance of Christian symbolism on artefacts and the adoption of the 'Christian' extended east-west burial without grave-goods, and subsequently, aspects of a more general cultural conversion, particularly in arts and crafts. In Lower Nubia such



indicators are seen, for example, in 'Christian' material such as baptismal spoons and church treasures in the royal cemeteries at Ballana (Török 1988, 69ff), the appearance of 'votive lamps' with overt Christian symbolism in settlements (Adams 2000, 86-9) and then the general transition from the 'typical' post-Meroitic tumulus burials to Christian forms. Aspects of more general cultural conversion associated with Christianity, drawing Nubia towards larger-scale cultural traditions of medieval Christendom, are latterly seen in religious architecture and decorative arts, as well as 'Christian' pottery.

With the abundance of cemetery data, changes in burial seem perhaps the most promising sphere for exploring the progress of conversion in this region. In particular, with the abundant data at our disposal relating to post-Meroitic (X-Group) burials between the First to the Third Cataracts, over 700km of the river valley, there is obvious potential for exploring spatial and temporal patterns. On the basis of the evidence available in the 1970s, the adoption of Christian burial practice has been taken to have been very rapid (Adams 1977, 444-45). However, with the benefit of the better understanding of post-Meroitic pottery and its (relative) chronology that we now have and new field data (e.g. Williams 1991; Rose 1993; Edwards 1994a; 1994c), there seems to be the potential to look again at this material as evidence for the progress of conversion.

Even though we are still lacking independent absolute dates for the pottery, these more refined relative chronologies allow us to identify some interesting patterns in the distribution of different pottery types, especially in burials of the pagan period. For the purposes of this study, we may make a broad distinction between two phases of pottery, especially apparent within the ubiquitous Ware R1. As Adams suggested (1986, 469-70), forms of Ware R1 drinking vessels ('goblets') do show temporal variation, with later forms tending to be taller and more slender, with different finishes and decoration. An attention to vessel form allows us to distinguish between assemblages with a range of 'Classic' types (Fig. 1), most typically found, in abundance, in the 'royal' cemeteries at Qustul and especially Ballana, and a second group of 'Late' post-Meroitic types (Fig. 2). As Williams

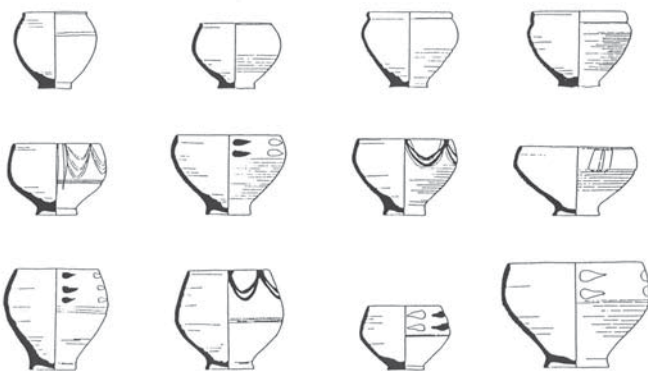


Figure 1. Typical 'Classic/Mid' X-Group goblet/bowl forms (based on Williams 1991).

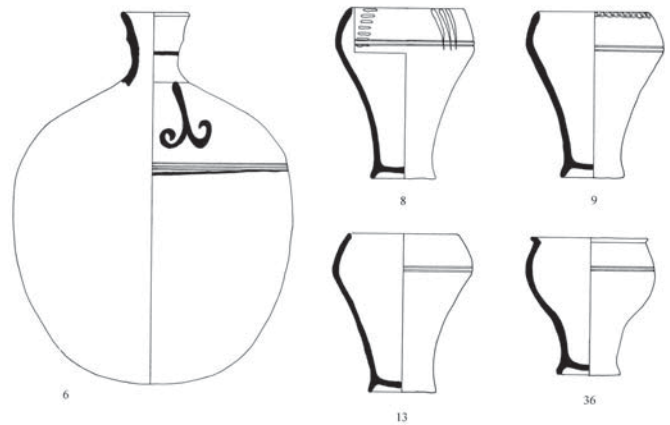


Figure 2. 'Late' X-Group pottery.

suggested (1991, 21-5, Table 9), a systematic examination of pottery may in turn allow us to suggest a relative chronology for post-Meroitic sites in Lower and Middle Nubia. Following Williams' work, a more extensive study has been possible covering all sites in the region, including information from still unpublished survey records from the Batn el Hajar,¹ and from recent work in the Third Cataract region.

On the basis of ceramic finds we can suggest at least a coarse-grained phasing of post-Meroitic sites throughout the region. When the distribution of cemeteries which can be dated to these 'Classic' and 'Late' phases is plotted (Fig. 3) several interesting features are immediately apparent. The most obvious of these is the marked scarcity of 'Late' pottery forms in burials in the core areas of Nubatia, north of the Second Cataract. On the other hand, there appears to be a virtual absence of 'Classic' (or indeed 'Early') pottery south of Murshid/Gemai. For the settlement history of Lower/Middle Nubia during the post-Meroitic period, this apparent division is in itself very interesting. It has previously been noted that the Batn el Hajar seems to have undergone a process of colonization during the post-Meroitic period having been only very sparsely inhabited during preceding centuries (Adams 1977, 395). On the basis of this evidence it is tempting to see this process as a southward expansion of the Nubatian sphere during the later post-Meroitic period. It is also tempting to suggest that this represented the spread of small-scale agriculture settlements into the region, made possible by the use of the *saqia* waterwheel, a form of settlement qualitatively very different to that encountered in Lower Nubia during the Meroitic period (Edwards 1996).

However, in the context of the religious changes happening in this period, it also raises the question as to why there do not appear to be burials with 'Late' pottery in the north? Just as Adams recognized that the absence of pagan burials with Ware R2 pottery was significant, this may equally be the case with the absence of 'Late' R1 forms. R2 pottery may in

¹Thanks are due to A. J. Mills for providing access to this material and encouraging me to work on it.

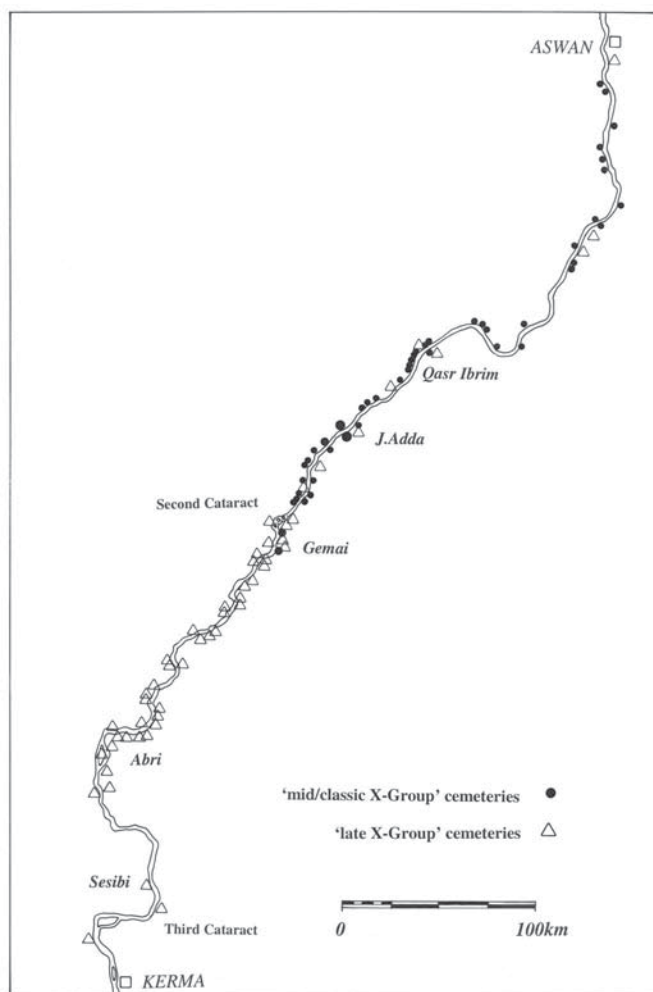


Figure 3. Phasing of 'X-Group' cemeteries in Lower/Middle Nubia.

fact best be seen as a marker for the end of the process. It may be suggested that pagan burials had almost entirely disappeared in northern Lower Nubia by the period in which these 'Late' Ware R1 forms were being produced, effectively excluding them from burial assemblages. They are, however, found on settlement sites in this area, for example at Arminna West (Trigger 1967, fig. 20), and in large quantities in late X-Group levels at Qasr Ibrim (e.g. in X-265, Edwards 1994b, 10-11).

In relation to the spread of Christianity, with this better definition of relative chronologies, it would seem that the adoption of Christian burial rites in the region was by no means immediate. Even at this superficial level of analysis it would appear to have taken place over a significant, if still undefined, period of time, and to have been spatially variable. There are also indications that the generally 'Late' date which we may assign to sites south of Murshid/Gemai may also be further refined. A variant of the 'Late' goblet forms decorated with a white festoon decoration (Fig. 2, 9) seems to be restricted to areas between Sesibi and Dal (Edwards 1994a, 175). While this may prove to represent merely a local stylistic variant in Middle Nubia, it is possible this may also have some chronological significance, appearing only in

very late burials. The close associations between pagan and Christian burials within the same cemetery are very apparent at several cemeteries in this area, as is the existence of what may be seen as 'Transitional' burial forms where tumulus superstructures continued to be constructed for otherwise 'Christian' burials (*op. cit.*, 176-77).

A closer reading of the archaeology clearly has the potential to provide a more dynamic picture of the process of conversion, while also raising further questions concerning some key groups of material. If we look at the Nubatian royal cemetery at Ballana, we may again ask what is the significance of the end of the sequence of royal graves there? Williams suggested that the 'end' of the cemetery and the abandonment of great tumulus burials were perhaps related to internal political developments, conflict with the Blemmyes or changing relations with Byzantine Egypt (1991, 159). However, when viewed within the context of regional patterns, it was clearly not an isolated phenomenon and a specific link may be suggested with the ongoing process of Christianisation. Rather than seeking another cause for the abandonment of the great tumulus burials, the simplest and most parsimonious interpretation of this shift is that, after these last burials, the Nubatian kings and their elite were being buried according to Christian rites, and effectively disappeared from the archaeological record.

Whatever the exact date at which this change in burial practice occurred, it would appear to be significantly earlier than in some other parts of Lower/Middle Nubia, and before the disappearance of typical X-Group ceramics. Current dating of the Ballana royal burials (see Török 1988 for a review) might suggest that this was probably not later than AD 500. If such is the case, this may provide us with a *terminus post quem* for the 'Late' forms of R1 pottery which do not occur there. It may also prompt some reconsideration of Kirwan's suggestion that some of the later burials represent individuals 'on the threshold of Christianity' (1982, 143). This is particularly relevant to debates concerning the significance of the Christian 'church treasures' (including a reliquary, censer, baptismal spoons, a spoon rest and perhaps silver dishes and bowls) found there, notably in tomb B3, a burial perhaps datable to around AD 450-475 (Török 1988, 143). While these are still commonly represented as objects looted from an Upper Egyptian church by raiding Nubians in the early 5th century (Török in Eide *et al.* 1998, 1141), we might wish to look again at Kirwan's suggestion that they actually relate to converts or potential converts, albeit still being buried with pagan rites (1982, 143). As Kirwan was well aware, similarly enigmatic finds are known from other royal burials on the fringes of Christendom. The burial of a Christian convert with his baptismal spoons by pagan successors at Sutton Hoo in England has posed problems of interpretation (Parker Pearson *et al.* 1993, 45). However, in a research area where the complexity of the conversion process is well recognised, the coexistence of Christian and pagan attributes need not be seen as problematic.



That we should be considering a more complex and possibly extended process of conversion, even in the Nobatian heartlands, is further indicated by evidence for local variability with, for example, the occasional occurrences of late pagan burials in the north (e.g. Cemeteries 15, 112) and/or the appearance of Christian symbols in apparently pagan contexts, for example with cross-marked jars in burials at Jebel Adda (Millet 1963, 153) or the tomb with a carved cross (Mills 1982, grave 193.30) at Qasr Ibrim. Qasr Ibrim, with its great pagan temple complex, is one of the more exceptional and interesting locations, where excavations suggest considerable activity very late in the post-Meroitic period. Here, we certainly have what appear to be some of the latest pagan burials in Lower Nubia (e.g. Mills 1982, graves 192.11, 12, 18, 28, 67) with 'Late' R1 and some R2 pottery. If we still cannot confidently suggest absolute dates for these, there is little reason to doubt that they are significantly later than any burials at Ballana. Large quantities of 'Late' R1 and R2 goblets, presumed to relate to the (pagan) ritual functions of the site, have also been found during recent excavations of post-Meroitic structures (Edwards 1994b), buildings which seem to have been abandoned, but still standing, when the first 'Early Christian' pottery wares appeared on the site. When exactly the Qasr Ibrim temples were finally closed and converted to churches (Adams 1982, 28) or demolished (Driskell *et al.* 1989) still remains unclear but a date in the mid- or later 6th century is quite possible. Such a date would, for example, correlate well with the conversion of the temple at Dendur into a church in 559 or 574 (Eide *et al.* 1998, 1194-96), although whether pagan cults had survived there into the mid-6th century remains unclear.

While an exhaustive treatment of all the relevant material is not possible here, it is apparent that even within the relatively constrained environment of Lower Nubia we can trace elements of the potentially complex history of conversion in the archaeological record. Possible syncretic practices in mortuary culture, perhaps spanning the period of 'transition', may also be found. We may, for example, be seeing this in the continued use of tumulus superstructures over otherwise 'Christian' burials, Christian symbols in 'pagan' graves and surface deposits of pottery, as found at Sesibi (Edwards 1994a). While the analysis of the archaeological material accumulated over the last century has barely begun, its potential is clearly very great.

Alodia and central Sudan

The Lower Nubian evidence may have important implications for how we view the archaeological record further south where both the time-scale over which the population(s) adopted Christianity remains even more poorly understood, and where it is far less clear how widespread the socio-cultural influences of the new religion and its practices may have been. Certainly in Alodia, the population is likely to have been far more heterogeneous than in Lower Nubia, probably including many more mobile or semi-mobile groups

alongside settled riverine farmers. Excavations at Soba (Shinnie 1955; Welsby and Daniels 1991; Welsby 1987; 1998) have done much to show that the richness of elite and ecclesiastical architecture and arts may in many respects stand comparison with that of the northern kingdoms. However, the more general material impact of the new religion is far less obvious than in the north. Christianisation was not, for example, accompanied by the same transformation of ceramic production seen in the northern kingdoms of Makuria and Nobatia, where a new range of highly distinctive 'Christian' pottery wares developed and persisted through the medieval period. With the exception of 'Soba Ware' and limited quantities of pottery imported from northern Nubia, medieval pottery production in Alodia appears to have maintained and developed existing traditions, with the continued dominance of handmade wares.

Material markers of the appearance of Christianity are limited and their dating remains difficult. The 'Soba Ware' industry is thought unlikely to predate the mid-6th century AD, but this remains no more than 'a working hypothesis' (Welsby 1998, 89). The construction of those churches which have been excavated at Soba post-dates the appearance of 'Soba Ware' (Welsby and Daniels 1991, 33-34); radiocarbon dates from the three churches on Mound B at Soba suggest that the earliest dates no earlier than the mid-7th century AD (*op.cit.*, 34). Some burial evidence is also available as several groups of medieval graves, including many following the standard Christian practices, have been excavated at the site. Some of these are certainly 'early' and a 6th century date may be suggested for some of them (Welsby 1998, 279).

Such archaeological evidence as we have from Soba is not inconsistent with the historical accounts. However, this does not provide a basis for meaningful generalisations about the Christianisation of Alodia and central Sudan. Instead, we may draw attention to some evidence which suggests that the progress of Christianisation and its cultural impact was, as we might suspect, quite variable within the Alodian sphere as well as being quite different from what we can see in northern Nubia.

Post-Meroitic and Medieval Gabati

Recent excavations at Gabati, which excavated some 50 post-Meroitic and medieval graves (Edwards 1998), provided us with our first clear evidence of the variable impact of Christianity in this region. It was apparent during the excavations that while many of the post-Meroitic graves had much in common with other graves of this general period from central Sudan, they also differed in several important respects, notably in the character of the pottery found in them. In particular, the large globular beer jars, commonly found throughout central Sudan and the Dongola Reach, were absent, while certain other pottery forms had not previously been found in 'pagan' post-Meroitic grave assemblages elsewhere in central Sudan. However, some similarities with pottery from Soba were apparent, suggesting that some graves

might be of rather late date.

A series of radiocarbon dates were secured which proved crucial in establishing the general chronology of the cemetery.² However, some were remarkably late and AMS dates from one grave T.28 strongly indicate a date in the late 7th century. On the basis of very similar finds, several other graves seem very likely to be of comparable date. Such a date is of course considerably later than the historical date for the 'official' conversion of Alodia to Christianity (c. AD 580). By contrast the only date for a possible 'Christian' burial (T.26, 1180±70BP) placed it no earlier than the 9th-10th century (Edwards 1998, 250).

Table 1. Radiocarbon ages and calibrated date ranges for pooled dates.

Grave	Pooled age BP	68% probability	95% probability
T.28	1345±26	AD 655-690	AD 650-715 AD 740-765

In view of the unexpectedly late date of some of these 'pagan' burials, it is also of interest that some of the excavated tumuli also showed unusual practices, with quite variable body orientations, and deposits of pots on the ground surface beneath the tumuli. The character of the pottery in the graves and in the surface deposits (Fig. 4) is also consistent with a late date, including types which in Makuria or Nubatia would seem to post-date the conversion to Christianity. Imported Aswani oil jars are similar to examples from Elephantine, broadly dated to the 6th-7th centuries (Gempeler 1992).³ Their presence in graves at Gabati is a very tangible indication of the late persistence of pagan burial forms in the south; in the north, such types (like Ware R2) seem to effectively postdate the period of pagan burials. Other anomalous material at Gabati includes a wheel-made bowl and a spouted jar very similar to types from Old Dongola which seem to be associated with the very early levels of 'Christian' occupation at the site (Pluskota 1990; 1991). Parallels for 'local' wares may be found further south, and in general terms, most of the Gabati pottery may be related to early medieval pottery traditions which were widespread in central Sudan, and are found at Soba and along the Blue Nile.

If the Gabati cemetery provides us with quite firm evidence for the late survival of pagan burial forms north of Soba, there is also evidence from the Blue Nile that the impact of Christianity on burial practices there may also have been limited, well into the medieval period. One small but interesting group of material comes from a site on the west bank of the Blue Nile, near Umm Sunt, a little south of Wad Medani. The site was first reported by Balfour Paul in the 1950s when he identified both a settlement and a cemetery and excavated a few graves. Sometime around 1960 the

² For a fuller discussion of the dates, see Edwards 1998, Appendix 10.

³ Sherds from similar vessels have also been found at Soba (Welsby 1998, 92).

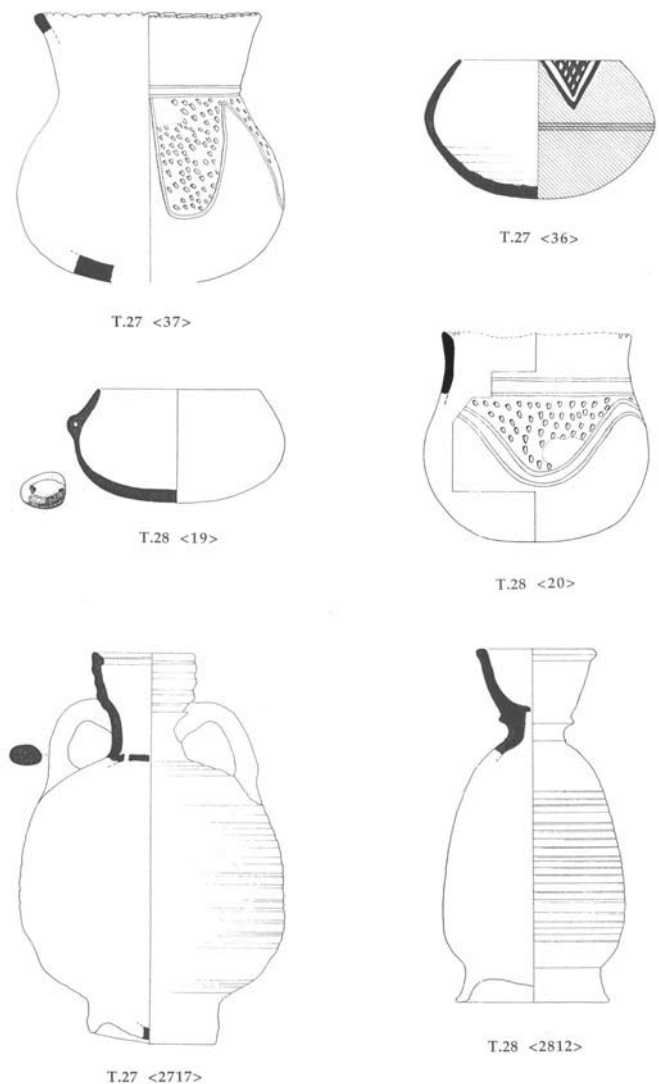


Figure 4. Some late post-Meroitic pottery from Gabati.

archaeology club of Hantoub School, the large secondary school opposite Wad Medani, were also active at the site, and carried out some further rescue work.⁴

Dating this material remains difficult. Some of the graves on the site clearly relate to widespread post-Meroitic traditions, perhaps dateable to the 4th-5th centuries (Edwards 1991). However, there is little reason to doubt that, as Balfour Paul suggested might be the case (1952, 213), many of the Umm Sunt burials were of medieval date and fall within the 'Christian' period, as traditionally understood. Our best parallels for most of the pottery, including some distinctive forms (Fig. 5), come from Soba, for example, various open bowls with one or more grooves below the rim (e.g. Welsby and Daniels 1991, types 200-207N), some with handles or lugs.

A Christian presence in the region is apparent in the form of graffiti on several of the Umm Sunt vessels (Fig. 6) and similar graffiti have previously been reported on pots found in graves elsewhere in this region, for example at Wad el

⁴ The history of work at the site is more fully discussed in Edwards (1991).

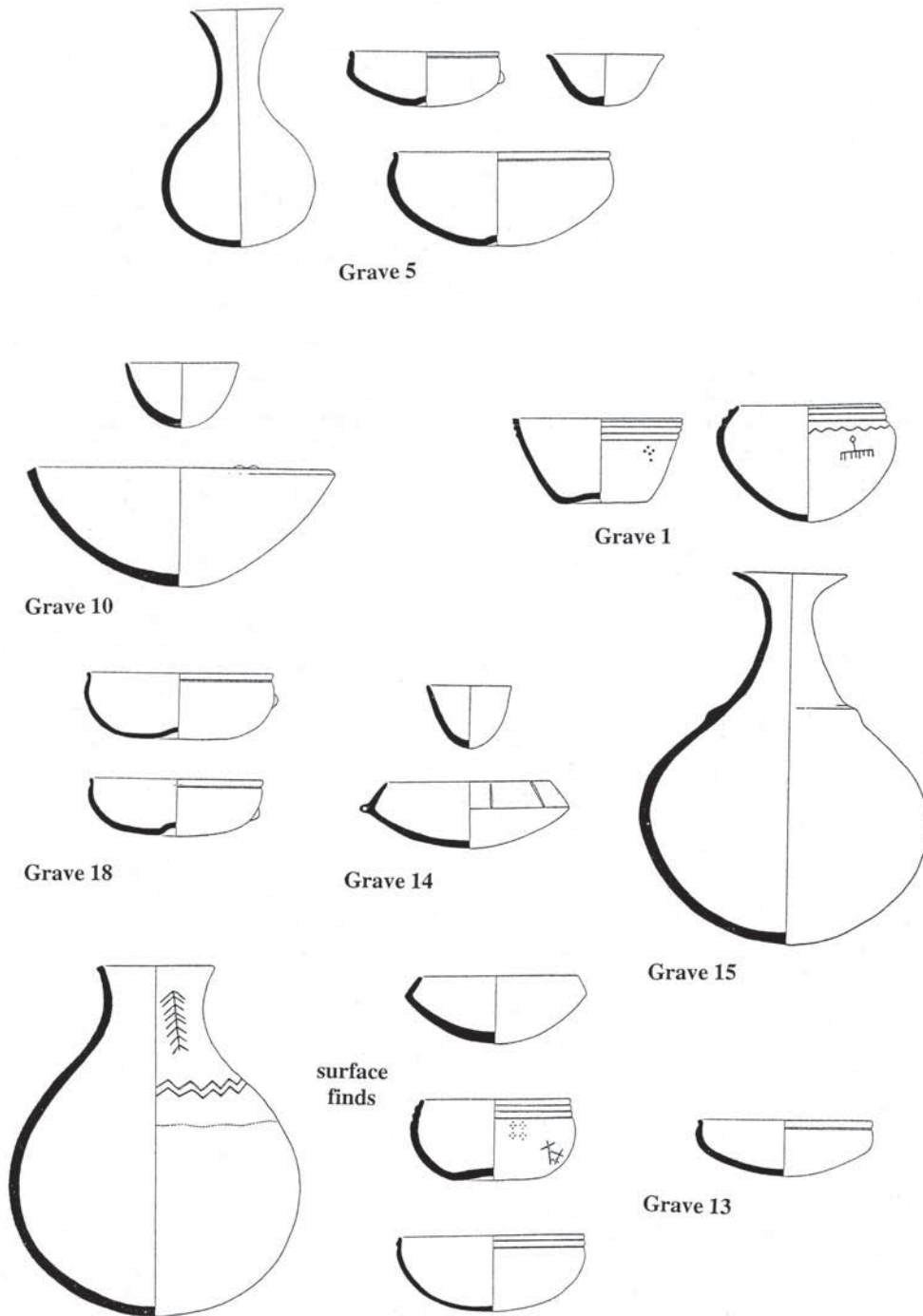


Figure 5. Pottery groups from Umm Sunt graves.

Haddad (Balfour Paul 1952, 213).⁵ On the other hand, both the deposition of pots in graves and the contracted burials would seem to represent the persistence of pre-Christian

⁵ This deposition of pottery in graves is also of interest in relation to some finds of 'Soba ware' vessels from the Blue Nile. An almost complete 'chalice' was found at Khalil el-Kubra, some 40km south of Sennar (Eisa & Welsby 1996), while half of another was found at a cemetery site at 'Karim's Garden' just north of Sennar (Edwards 1991, 47). Similar vessels are known from sherds in early medieval deposits at Soba, but the survival of such complete pieces is surprising and may best be explained by their coming from graves.

burial traditions into the medieval period, as was also found at Gabati. How late such practices may have survived is impossible to suggest in the absence of any means of more closely dating the graves. The fragmentary picture we have from this site makes further interpretation difficult, but the occurrence of extended burials, some at least oriented east-west, suggests that more orthodox Christian rites were followed at the site at some time. Whether the extended burials with pottery excavated by Balfour Paul (Plate 1) could represent a 'transitional' or local syncretic form cannot be determined, but this certainly remains a possibility.

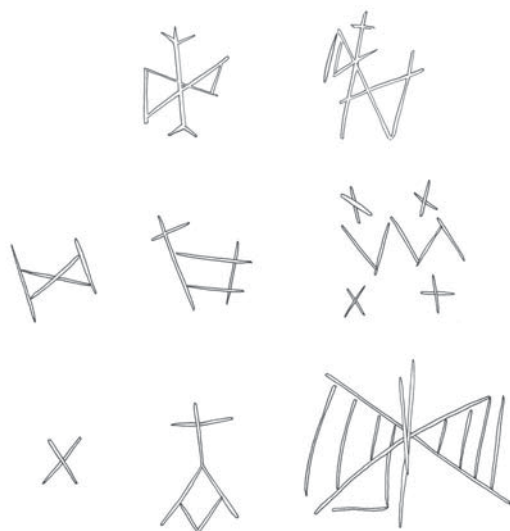


Figure 6. Graffiti from Umm Sunt.

The Archaeology of Christianisation

These disparate groups of material suggest that considerable potential exists to move beyond the conventional narratives of the conversion of Nubia to develop more explicitly archaeological studies of the Christianisation of Nubia. In Lower Nubia there is abundant evidence that the process of conversion, as reflected in the shift to Christian burial practices, was by no means immediate. The new burial practices seem to have first taken root in the core areas of Nobatia, north of the Second Cataract. There is very little evidence for any significant settlement further south of the area between Gemai and the Third Cataract in the early/mid post-Meroitic period. However, by the time settlements were spreading through the Batn el Hajar down to the Third Cataract, most of the population north of the Second Cataract seem to have already abandoned pagan burial forms. The



Plate 1. Extended burials with bowls at Umm Sunt during Balfour Paul excavations (photo courtesy of John Alexander).

conversion of areas south of the Second Cataract seems to have taken place appreciably later.

In interpreting the significance of the end of the Ballana sequence of royal/elite burials, it is surely significant that this was broadly contemporary with what appears to be the adoption of Christian burial practices throughout much of the Nobatian heartlands. If we can place this as early as c. AD 500, this is of course significantly earlier than the events recorded by John of Ephesus. How we may relate the archaeological evidence for the spread of Christianity to the historical accounts which have come down to us, and the 'events' which they record, is of course another issue. The material briefly reviewed here suggests that archaeological evidence may tell us much about the progress of conversion as a process over time. Closer dating of material may provide us with a better idea of the timescale over which this process was taking place, but much work remains to be done in this area. However, implicit assumptions that the 'events' themselves may readily be identified in the archaeological record are more problematic.

While data are still limited in central Sudan, even the little evidence we have suggests that the processes of Christianisation within what we may see as the Alodian region were probably even more complex than in the north. In some places, even the adoption of orthodox Christian burial rites seems to have been slow, and it must be considered that many areas may have remained pagan, or only superficially Christianised, during the medieval period. This in itself will be a research problem of considerable interest. More generally, however, evidence for such variability and unevenness may alert us to the need to rethink the way in which medieval Nubia is so often portrayed as 'Christian Nubia'. It is very likely that future fieldwork in central Sudan will reveal material similar to that encountered at Umm Sunt and Gabati which will be difficult to categorise with the labels we currently use. Instead, rather more complex and nuanced interpretative approaches will be required which can accommodate social complexity and variety in the interaction between the new religion and existing cultural traditions developing out of the pagan post-Meroitic period. The possibility may well be raised that Christianity rested quite lightly on many elements of Nubian societies in the medieval period, as Islam did in the post-medieval period (O'Fahey and Spaulding 1974).⁶ Rather than Christianity being the defining characteristic of medieval Nubian culture, patterns of continuity and change in material traditions following the appearance of Christianity in the region are likely to have been very variable, as is widely recognised in other contexts (Lane 1999, 153). We should perhaps also begin to

⁶ In the case of the impact of Islam, Spaulding (1985) has compelling arguments that while Funj Sennar may have been nominally Muslim for several centuries, it was only in the mid-18th century that Islamic legal principles became dominant, with far reaching effects. Recent archaeological work in West Africa has also shown the unevenness and variability of the impact of Islam in medieval Mali (Insoll 1996).



distinguish more clearly between religious conversion and cultural conversion. If we step outside the churches and monasteries, a basic question remains: to what extent did Christianity transform societies of the Middle Nile (cf. O'Fahey 1993)?

Bibliography

- Adams, W. Y. 1977. *Nubia: Corridor to Africa*. London, Princeton.
- Adams, W. Y. 1982. 'Qasr Ibrim: An Archaeological Conspectus', in J. M. Plumley (ed.). *Nubian Studies*. Warminster, 25-33.
- Adams, W. Y. 1986. *Ceramic Industries of Medieval Nubia*. Lexington.
- Adams, W. Y. 2000. *Meinarti I. The Late Meroitic, Ballaña and Transitional Occupation*. Sudan Archaeological Research Society Publication No. 5. London.
- Balfour Paul, H. G. 1952. 'Early Cultures on the Northern Blue Nile', *Sudan Notes and Records* 33, 202-13.
- Driskell, B., N. K. Adams and P. French 1989. 'A newly discovered temple at Qasr Ibrim', *Archéologie du Nil Moyen* 3, 11-24.
- Edwards, D. N. 1991. 'Three Cemetery sites on the Blue Nile', *Archéologie du Nil Moyen* 5, 41-64.
- Edwards, D. N. 1994a. 'Post-Meroitic ('X-Group') and Christian burials at Sesibi, Northern Sudan. The Excavations of 1937', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 80, 159-78.
- Edwards, D. N. 1994b. 'Some recent work on the post-Meroitic ('X-Group') in Lower Nubia', *SARS Newsletter* 6, 9-11.
- Edwards, D. N. (1994c) 'Post-Meroitic settlement in Lower Nubia', (unpublished paper presented at the 8th International Conference for Nubian Studies, Lille 1994).
- Edwards, D. N. 1996. *The Archaeology of the Meroitic State*. (BAR S640) Oxford.
- Edwards, D. N. 1998. *Gabati. Volume I*. Sudan Archaeological Research Society Publication No. 3. London.
- Edwards, D. N. 1999. 'Christianity and Islam in the Middle Nile: Towards a study of religion and social change in the long term', in Insoll (ed.), 94-104.
- Eide, T., T. Hägg, R. H. Pierce and L. Török (eds) 1998. *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum*. Vol. III. Bergen.
- Eisa, Khidir A. and D. A. Welsby 1996. 'A Soba ware vessel from the Upper Blue Nile', *Beiträge zur Sudanforschung* 6, 133-36.
- Gempeler, R. D. 1992. *Elephantine X: Die Keramik römischer bis früh-arabischer Zeit*. Mainz.
- Insoll, T. 1996. *Islam, Archaeology and History - Gao region (Mali) ca. AD 900-1250*. (BAR S647) Oxford.
- Insoll, T. (ed.) 1999. *Case Studies in Archaeology and World Religion*. (BAR S755). Oxford.
- Kirwan, L. P. 1937. 'Studies in the later History of Nubia', *Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* 24, 69-105.
- Kirwan, L. P. 1982. 'Some thoughts on the conversion of Nubia to Christianity', in J. M. Plumley (ed.). *Nubian Studies*. Warminster, 142-5.
- Kirwan, L. P. 1987. 'The Birth of Christian Nubia: some archaeological problems', *Revista degli Studi Orientali* 63, 119-34.
- Lane, P. 1999. 'Archaeology, Nonconformist Missions and the 'Colonisation of Consciousness' in Southern Africa, c.1820-1900', in Insoll (ed.), 153-65.
- Millet, N. B. 1963 'Gebel Adda: Preliminary Report for 1963', *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 2, 147-65.
- Mills, A. J. 1982. *The Cemeteries at Qasr Ibrim*. London.
- O'Fahey, R. 1993. 'Islamic Hegemonies in the Sudan', in L. Brenner (ed.). *Muslim Identity and social change in sub-Saharan Africa*. London, 21-35.
- O'Fahey, R. and J. Spaulding 1974. *Kingdoms of the Sudan*. London.
- Parker-Pearson, M., R. van Noort, and A. Woolf 1993. 'Three men and a boat: Sutton Hoo and the East Saxon Kingdom', *Anglo-Saxon England* 22, 27-50.
- Pluskota, K. 1990. 'Early Christian pottery from Old Dongola', in W. Godlewski (ed.). *Coptic Studies: acts of the 3rd International Congress of Coptic Studies, Warsaw, 20-25 August 1984*. Warsaw, 20-25.
- Pluskota, K. 1991. 'Dongola. A pottery production centre from the early Christian period', in W. Godlewski (ed.). *Coptic and Nubian Pottery*. Part II. Warsaw, 34-56.
- Rémondon, R. 1952. 'L'Égypte à la suprême résistance au christianisme (V^e-VIII^e siècles)', *BIFAO* 51, 63-78.
- Rose, P. J. 1993. *The aftermath of the Roman frontier in Lower Nubia*. Unpublished Ph.D thesis. University of Cambridge.
- Shinnie, P. L. 1955. *Excavations at Soba*. Khartoum.
- Spaulding, J. 1985. 'The End of Nubian Kingship in the Sudan, 1720-1760', in M. W. Daly (ed.). *Modernization in the Sudan*. New York, 17-27.
- Török, L. 1988. *Late Antique Nubia*. (Antaeus 16). Budapest.
- Trigger, B. G. 1967. *The Late Nubian Settlement at Arminna West*. New Haven and Philadelphia.
- Trombley, F. R. 1995. *Hellenic Religion and Christianization, c.370-529*. Vol. 2. Leiden.
- Vantini, G. 1975. *Oriental Sources concerning Nubia*. Heidelberg and Warsaw.
- Welsby, D. A. 1987. 'A Perspective of Nubia from Soba', in T. Hägg (ed.). *Nubian Culture. Past and Present*. Stockholm, 278-84.
- Welsby, D. A. 1998. *Soba II. Renewed excavations at the metropolis of the Kingdom of Alwa*. British Institute in Eastern Africa monograph series no. 15. London.
- Welsby, D. A. and C. M. Daniels 1991. *Soba: Archaeological research at a medieval capital on the Blue Nile*. British Institute in Eastern Africa monograph series no. 12. London.
- Williams, B. 1991. *The Noubadian X-group remains*. (The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Nubian Expedition 9). Chicago.