

# SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Bulletin No. 14

2010





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## Contents

### The Kirwan Memorial Lecture

- The Post-Meroitic from Kirwan to the Present  
*Mahmoud el-Tayeb*

Qasr Wad Nimeiri and its *Qubbas*  
*Intisar Soghayroun el-Zein* 91

Ethnoarchaeology and post-holes: building a  
Bisharin house  
*Julie R. Anderson and Salah eldin Mohamed Ahmed* 96

### Reports

Nubian architecture in an Egyptian town? Building E12.11 at Amara West <i>Neal Spencer</i>	15
Cemetery D at Amara West: the Ramesside Period and its aftermath <i>Michaela Binder, Neal Spencer and Marie Millet</i>	25
Golden Accessories: a link to the outside world from the pyramid at site 4-F-71 (Fourth Cataract, SARS Concession) <i>Isabella Welsby Sjöström</i>	45
Excavations at Kawa, 2009-10 <i>Derek A. Welsby</i>	48
The Meroitic Necropolises of Sai Island. Second season at the Meroitic Cemetery 8-B-5.A <i>Vincent Francigny</i>	56
Second report on the ceramics from the Meroitic Cemetery 8-B-5.A <i>Romain David</i>	60
Excavations at Sedeinga. A New Start <i>Claude Rilly and Vincent Francigny</i>	62
A Recently Discovered Meroitic Cemetery at Berber, River Nile State, Sudan. Preliminary Report <i>Mahmoud Suleiman Bashir</i>	69
Dongola after the 2008-2010 Seasons: Royalty, Saints and Blessed Bishops <i>Włodzimierz Godlewski</i>	75
Gebel Adda Cemetery One, 1963. Post-medieval reuse of X-Group tumuli <i>Reinhard Huber and David N. Edwards</i>	83

### Miscellaneous

Obituaries Salah Omer es-Saddig (1950-2009), a personal appreciation <i>Abdelrahim M. Khabir</i>	107
Giovanni Vantini <i>Bogdan Żurawski</i>	107
Book review William Y. Adams 2009. <i>The Road from Frijoles Canyon. Anthropological Adventures on Four Continents</i> <i>Derek A. Welsby</i>	109

*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).

*Sudan & Nubia* is a peer-reviewed journal



# Kirwan Memorial Lecture

## The Post-Meroitic from Kirwan to the Present

*Mahmoud el-Tayeb*

In 1998 SARS invited me to give a lecture on the results of my fieldwork in Sudan at their annual colloquium, held, on that occasion, at Cambridge University. A prominent guest in the audience was Sir Laurence Kirwan himself. I was highly honoured by his presence and equally moreover impressed by his strong memory and mild character. Unfortunately, that was the first and last occasion for me to meet him as the next invitation which I received from SARS to present a paper, in 2009, was upon the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Sir Laurence's death. This article covers the subject of the second lecture, which was presented at the British Museum.

When Sir Laurence Kirwan and his generation of scholars took to the field in Nubia, knowledge of the Meroitic and Post-Meroitic periods was quite modest, but they were nevertheless able to establish a solid base for future research. Today, both periods are inextricably linked, and there is no way to avoid a brief archaeological survey of the former in order to understand the latter and the process which finally ended in the disintegration of the once-united Kushite state.

Pioneering work on the period in question dates from the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This work was either the result of salvage campaigns, dictated by development projects (dam construction, investment schemes), or merely accidental, sporadic activities, rather than planned programmes of research. The best examples of such activities are the two Lower Nubia surveys undertaken by Reisner in 1907 and Emery and Kirwan in 1931. Further examples from Upper Nubia, such as Garstang's excavations in the capital city Meroe, followed by some later excavations at Gemmai (Bates and Dunham 1927) and Firka (Kirwan 1939), have thrown light on and drawn attention to a hitherto unknown period. Yet, both these earlier excavations and those later conducted at el-Ushara (Marshall and Abd el-Rahman Adam 1953, 40-46) and Tanqasi (Shinnie 1954, 66-85) raised more questions than they resolved although they opened the door wide for future studies in this new field. In spite of these earlier efforts, this period received scant attention from archaeologists and researchers in the field in Sudan during the first 70 years of the last century.

After the end of the Nubian campaign the interest of archaeologists was directed towards territories above the Third Cataract and in Central Sudan. Accordingly, research on the Post-Meroitic period began to witness a little progress.

A major project was launched by the French Unit attached to the then Sudan Antiquities Service. The French Unit in Sudan's main objective is rescue archaeology; nonetheless, the rescue operations which started at el-Kadada, et-Taragma and el-Ghaba in the mid-1970s lasted more than 10 years. A significantly large amount of information relating to the Meroitic and Post-Meroitic periods was obtained from these excavations, the results encouraging Lenoble to instigate a study programme on material relating to the Post-Meroitic period in the Shendi Reach, on both river banks. The programme included work at Shaqalu, Jebel Makbor and Berber, as well as the sites noted above, on the right bank of the Nile. On the left bank field reconnaissance was undertaken over the whole area between Shendi and Berber, resulting in the registration of several thousand mound burials, and in addition to this three sites south of el-Metemma were excavated. These lay at esh-Sheiteb, at Hosh el-Kafir as well as the remarkable site of el-Hobagi, which became the last and most important component in the unfinished study programme. To the best of my knowledge this was the first project of its kind devoted to a comprehensive study of this period. In consequence, it resulted in opening essential discussion on a number of important issues which can be summarised as follows:-

Terminology, after almost 100 years since the term X-Group was first applied, to which have been added Post-Meroe, Ballana Culture, Tanqasi Culture, and Post-Pyramidal, it is time to think of more suitable terms, in accordance with the recent state of knowledge, in the light of the numerous new excavations.

The coming of the Noba tribes into the Nile Valley, was it invasion or infiltration?

Does the archaeological evidence favour the former or the latter version?

The need for reinterpretation of King Ezana's inscription, and his military campaign westward, and the alleged destruction of Meroe, the Kushite capital.

The end of the Meroitic state's central power and the consequence of this; was it a sudden collapse or a long process of decline and disintegration?

The previous point is connected to the debate on continuity and discontinuity.

Pottery production, as evidence either of cultural evolution or ethnic changes.

Changes and diversity in burial construction and funerary customs from Early Meroitic to Late Post-Meroitic, and the meaning of these.

Were the changes which took place in society during the 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> centuries ethnic or cultural?

During the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and this century's first decade further work on sites related to the Meroitic and Post-Meroitic periods has been carried out. Once again the majority of these works have been dictated by

the construction of dams and roads. As a result the majority of field activity has been concentrated in Central and Northern Sudan, extending downriver, from Khartoum to the Third Nile Cataract. Most information has been gathered from the Dongola Reach, between the Third and Fourth Cataracts. The international campaign, organised by the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, between 2003 and 2008 made rescue of the heritage of the Fourth Cataract region possible, unveiling the rich archaeology of this territory. The work, which was carried out in a short space of time, has yielded a lot of new and valuable data on the subject under discussion here even though it was limited and incomplete. It is noteworthy that prior to this campaign almost every burial mound was designated as Post-Meroitic, irrespective of its shape, construction and contents, while 'Late Meroitic' was quite an indefinite term. Detailed analysis of the Dongola Reach material, specifically that from the Fourth Cataract, and the possibility to compare it with material from other Central Nile Valley sites, has made it possible to distinguish four phases of burial evolution in a chronological sequence, from Late Meroitic to Late Post-Meroitic.

### **Funerary customs, changes and evolution**

Apparently, during the Early Meroitic period, funerary customs in Lower and Upper Nubia shared a common tradition, although some regional diversity can be detected. Two main types of burial construction, with some variation, were noted. The simplest type of graves consists of an elongated, sub-rectangular pit. The second type of earlier burial, the so-called 'foot-shaped', or 'cave-grave', consists of a short descenary or descending ramp, terminating in a cave-like chamber. In both cases, east-west orientation was predominant; however, alignment north-south was sometimes used. In northern Nubia, the standard inhumation practice of the period was for the skeleton to be laid in an extended dorsal position, with head to the west, rarely due north, with the hands resting on the pelvis. The extended position which originated in Egyptian mortuary traditions was fully adopted by the Kushites during the Napatan period and survived until the Classic Meroitic period. In the heartland of the Meroitic state, however, interments during this early phase were different. The body was either laid in a flexed position on its side, left or right, or in a fully contracted position, with its head to the south. The practice of placing the body in an extended dorsal position seems to have reached this region only in the later Classic period. One would assume that Meroitic southern societies were strongly influenced by earlier burial traditions, originating from Neolithic culture (for more information see: Schiff Giorgini 1971, 343-346; Fernandez 1984, 43-84; Żurawski 1987, 40; Caneva 1988c, 189-208; Williams 1991, 302, fig. 131a; 303, fig. 132a; 311, fig. 140a; 322, fig. 151; Edwards 1998, 11-60; Näser 1999, 19f, 27, fig. 2; Mahmoud el-Tayeb and Kolosowska 2007, 12-19). Changes and cultural diversity may be observed in grave construction in both the northern and southern parts

of the Kingdom (Edwards 2004, 174-176). Classic Meroitic burials of common people in northern Nubia, in contrast to royal and elite burials, consisted of rectangular pits, which seem to have been covered by a brick vault and marked on the surface by a mastaba or a small pyramid (Woolley and MacIver 1910, 32-45; Griffith 1925, 63-69, pl. XXII; Francigny 2009, 92-96). Meanwhile, in the south, the axial burial chamber had been replaced by a perpendicular chamber and would have been entered via a sloping ramp (Geus 1984, 35). The burial was usually covered by a circular mound, built from locally available material, such as a mixture of gravel, earth, sand and rough stones. So far Gabati appears to be the only site south of the Fifth Cataract where Classic Meroitic burials were provided with mud-brick structures of differing forms (Edwards 1998, 13-14, fig. 2.2; 21-22, fig. 2.6; 36-37, fig. 2.15).

It seems that in nearly every earlier study of burial customs, the Late Meroitic period has not been clearly defined. In many studies, the existence of wheel-made and handmade pottery, in the same grave, has been taken as evidence of a direct shift from Meroitic to Post-Meroitic traditions, as exemplified by the el-Kadada case (Geus 1984, 36, figs 77-78; Geus and Lenoble 1985, 67-92). One would assume that the relatively small amount of work undertaken in this field supports such an interpretation and dating.

The inhospitable territory of the Fourth Cataract region, with its low population density, offers an ideal environment to preserve vestiges of the past. For example, in the concession of Gdańsk Archaeological Mission on the left bank of the Nile alone, more than 80 sites, dating from the Early Meroitic to the Late post-Meroitic period (350 BC - AD 550), were registered. Thirty-two of these are cemeteries. Despite the fact that most of the burials in these cemeteries were plundered, in the past and present alike, much valuable information was obtained from them. The results of the Fourth Cataract campaign are of considerable value in terms of creating a general framework for burial traditions, not only in the locale, but also, more generally, particularly in Upper Nubia. The late phase of the Meroitic Kingdom was a time of degradation, poverty and extreme cultural diversity. This is reflected in the burials of this period. Changes were evident in grave construction and in their contents, as well as in the body position. In northern Nubia, the rectangular, simple pits, covered with different kinds of mud-brick structures, were replaced by other types of burial. These consisted of low flat-topped tumuli, delimited by a revetment of small black stones, with diameters ranging from 10-15m. The substructures featured some variation in shape. Some have small circular shafts, about 1-1.3m in diameter, with a centrally-cut oval entrance, leading to an oval pit, oriented east-west, broadening towards the bottom. Others have a rounded shaft with the burial chamber's semi-circular entrance cut into the northern part of the shaft, forming a single step. Another variation consists of a cylindrical vertical shaft, about 1m deep, with a side niche. The body was usually laid in a contracted position, on its left or right side, with its hands raised in front of the



face, the head to the east or west. Funerary offerings became far less common than in the earlier period, in some instances limited to a single pottery vessel (Mahmoud el-Tayeb and Kolosowska 2007, 19-21, figs 9 and 10).

As mentioned above, the last three decades have seen further advances in the field of Post-Meroitic studies, particularly in Upper Nubia and the material culture thus studied has shed further light on this period. Close examination of the material has shown that accepted thinking in the first half of the last century requires complete revision. It is generally accepted that the term 'Post-Meroe' was widely applied to the period succeeding the end of central authority in Meroe. However, the collected data reflect some variety, but not a break, between Early and Late Post-Meroe, as in the previous periods (between Early and Late Meroitic). The division is mainly based on grave typology, pottery classification and the nature of the inhumations and has been confirmed by radiocarbon analysis (mainly on material from the Fourth Cataract). On the same bases, Upper Nubia can be divided into three regional zones, comprising the Gezira in the far south, the area between Khartoum and the Fifth Cataract and the third zone between the Fourth and Third Cataracts. Although these three zones belong to one chronological horizon, nevertheless some differences between them can be observed with regard to the above-noted criteria. The southern zone is far less explored and poorly known than the others. Yet, in view of the recent state of research, it appears that the common type of burial is the "so-called" beehive grave which is best represented at el-Ushara, es-Sabeil, Amara en-Nasri and Botri (Marshall and Abd el-Rahman Adam 1953, 40-46; Mahmoud el-Tayeb 1999, 604-15; Edwards 1991, 43; Abdelrahman Ali 2003, 93; Mahmoud Suliman 2007, 94-96). It is noteworthy that this type of burial has rarely been found further downstream (see Osama A. el-Nur and Hassan Bandi 1993, 323-331). Far better known are graves in the region between Khartoum and the Fifth Cataract. Burials with a descending ramp terminating in a perpendicular chamber were widely used in this period. (Lenoble 1987, 92-93, 110-111; Geus and Lenoble 1985, 67-92; Edwards 1998, 69-111). However, another version, consisting of a double descenary, giving access into a single, large, burial chamber was also noted. Since this type was found only at a few sites, at Meroe, Berber, el-Fereikha and Akad, together with the fact that all are characterised by rich grave furniture, one may assume that they belong to an elite class of people (Garstang 1911; Lenoble 1991, 167-181; Anderson and Salah Mohamed Ahmed 2002, 15-29; Mohamed Faroug *et al.* 2007, 99-100). Another type, apparently prepared for people of lower social status, consisted of a vertical shaft with rounded entrance and a side niche. A step was cut on one side of the shaft to facilitate easy access to the burial chamber. It seems that this type of burial appeared in the Late Meroitic period and remained in use in this region during the Post-Meroitic period (Lenoble 1987a, 234-235, 93-94, pls XV, XVI, XVII).

Until recently, the northern part of Upper Nubia,

designated the Dongola Reach, was considered, from an archaeological perspective, to have been poorly explored in comparison with the Shendi Reach. Today, the fieldwork and research projects which have been carried out since the 1990s, including the relatively intensive work done in the Fourth Cataract Region, have greatly increased knowledge and understanding of mortuary traditions in the periods from Early Meroitic to Late Post-Meroitic in that area. Excavations in the cemeteries of Ab-Gahoyia, el-Higliga and Gerf el-Hummar, revealed a type of Early Meroitic grave with some variety of construction (Figure 1). The majority of the burials shared identical body positioning and orientation of the deceased, and were also found without funerary offerings. The presence of many Meroitic pottery sherds on the surfaces of these cemeteries may indicate a regional practice of depositing offerings around the tumulus (Mahmoud el-Tayeb and Kolosowska 2007, 12-19). Such a tradition, as far as I know, has not been noted elsewhere in Nubia during this period, probably because east-west burials were in some instances mistakenly considered to be of Christian date (probably at Jebel Makbor, Gabati and Akad).

The aforementioned typology of Late Meroitic burials was documented in some cemeteries of the region, at Hager Sail, el-Gabarna, Khor el-Busharyia and el-Kassinger Bahary (Figure 1). All the excavated burials have a similar superstructure, but differences can be seen in the construction of the substructures. The practice of contracted burials, with the body laid on its side, was revived in this period (Figure 2). In most of the burials investigated on both riverbanks offerings were usually frequent, but not abundant. Bearing in mind that, during the early period, no offerings accompanied the deceased, then one should consider that cultural changes might have occurred in this rural society. These cultural changes may also have led towards further evolution in the burial customs of this area. The conditions already described at the Fourth Cataract allowed, for the first time, the identification of burials with characteristic features, attributed to a transitional phase between the Late and Post-Meroitic periods, in four burial grounds: Ab-Heregil, Umm Gibier and el-Kassinger Bahary, on the left bank, as well as at el-Haraz near Jebel Kulgeili on the river's right bank. The main feature of these burials appears to be the combination of two types, well-known in Central Sudan, firstly a descending ramp and secondly, in the Dongola Reach, a rectangular shaft, resulting in the formation of a short, east-west *dromos*, terminating in a deep, rectangular, vertical shaft, provided with one or two side chambers (Mahmoud el-Tayeb and Kolosowska 2007, 21-22, fig. 11) (Figure 3, Plates 1 and 2).

In contrast to the earlier period, grave construction in Post-Meroitic times exhibits great regional differences between the three stated zones. Generally, the most common type of Post-Meroitic burial in the Dongola Reach consists of a rectangular, vertical shaft with a side chamber, hewn into one wall at the bottom of the shaft. In the majority of the excavated graves, the main burial chamber is most often

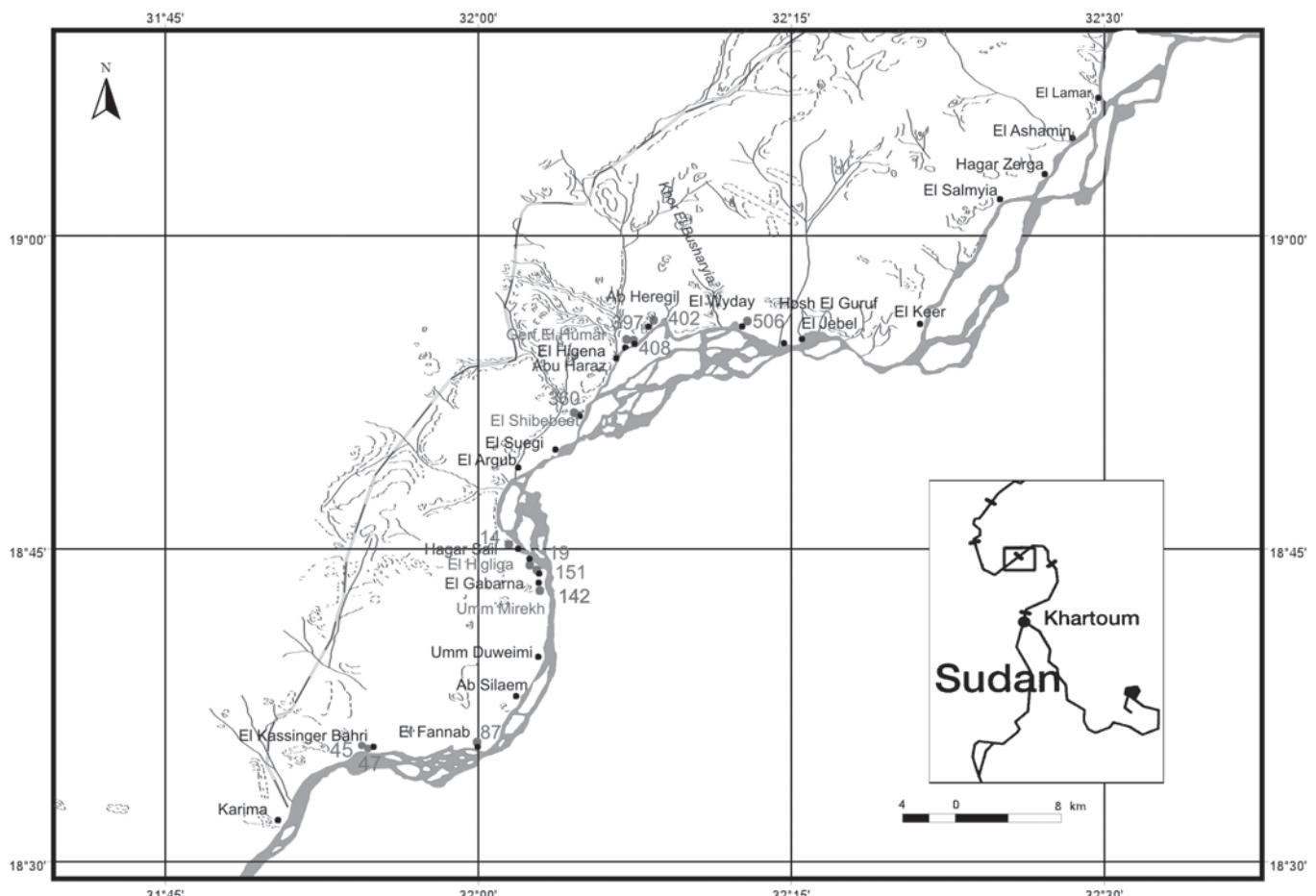


Figure 1. Map of the Fourth Cataract Region.

found on the tomb's southern side. However, this was not the only change to occur, as changes can also be seen in the body orientation, in which the placing of the head towards the east becomes dominant, while other orientations are rarely seen. The end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century is probably when this type of grave construction became the norm in the Dongola Reach (Figure 4). One of the earlier tombs of this type, located in the cemetery of Jebel Ghaddar North, designated ROM

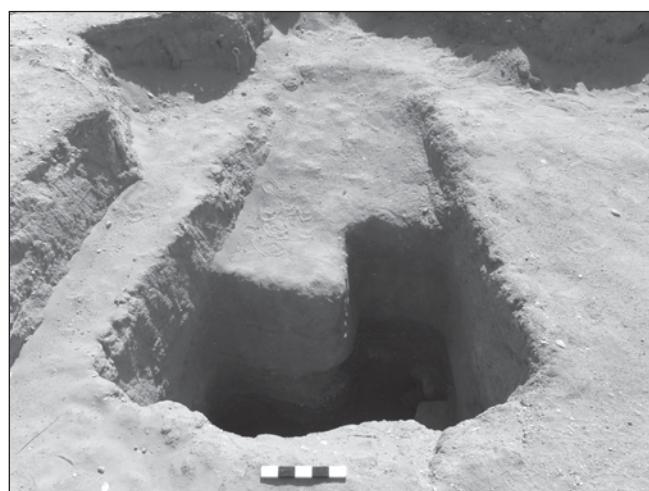


Plate 1. Dromos of the Transitional burial, el-Kassinger 47. T.11.

32/1, was excavated by the Royal Ontario expedition (Phillips 1987, 53-41), while one of the latest examples of this type is represented by a tumulus dug in the same cemetery which was found surrounded by 55 Early Christian burials. The burial was found intact, but without grave goods. Later excavations conducted in various cemeteries such as Jebel Ghaddar South Ts.1, 2; Hammur-Abassyah T.4 in the vicinity of Old Dongola and el-Kassinger Bahary 45.5, about 15km upstream of Kareima, confirmed the continuous use of this type into the early Christian period (Phillips 1987; Mahmoud el-Tayeb 1994, 65-82; 2003; Kolosowska and Mahmoud el-Tayeb 2007, 20-22, fig. 22).

Over time, wealthy burials underwent major modifications. Probably in the mid 5<sup>th</sup> century, grave construction witnessed the beginning of these modifications, with the addition of a chamber to contain grave offerings. At el-Kassinger Bahary T.45/1 consisted of two chambers, the deceased occupying the southern chamber, accompanied by some offerings, while the eastern chamber was completely devoted to grave goods (Figure 5). These comprised both handmade and wheel-made pottery. It was the first time in this region that three wheel-made beer jars of Lower Nubian origin were found amongst the offerings (Mahmoud el-Tayeb 1998, 37-40, figs 2.8; 3.8-9). The large tumuli fields at ez-Zuma, Tanqasi and Hammur-Abassyah were always considered to be related to

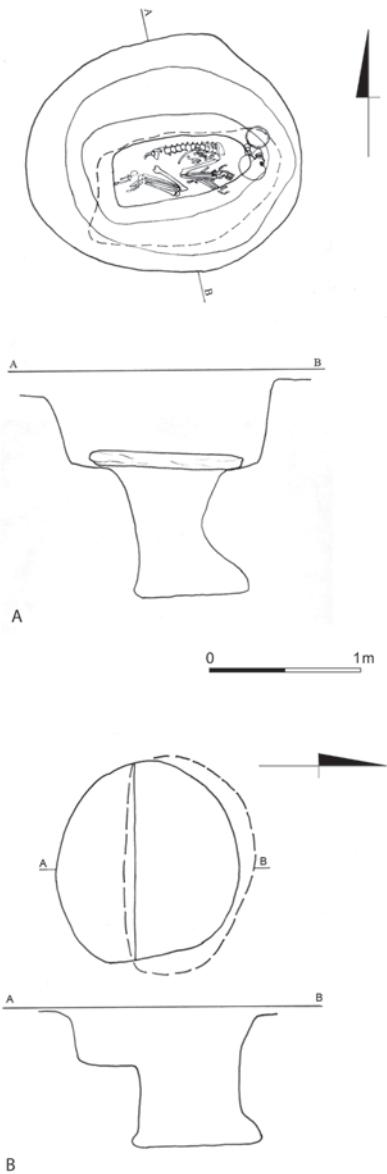


Figure 2. Late Meroitic burials. A. Hagar Sail 14. T.7; B. Khor El-Bushariya 753. T.47 (scale 1:50).

important high-ranking people, especially the first two. The significance of these cemeteries has been confirmed through excavation. A unique type of burial was uncovered beneath the huge tumuli, never previously found in Upper Nubia. Further modification of these burials is characterised by substructures consisting of a roughly square-shaped, vertical shaft with an average size of 4 x 4m, and a depth ranging from 2.8m to 5m. A 'pier' of varying size, usually remained on the east side. The pier, which abuts the eastern wall, imparts to the shaft a U-shaped plan, with approximately equal sides. Access to the bottom of the shaft was simplified by cutting either a single step, or multiple steps, into its east wall. The grave as a rule contained between three to five side-chambers, hewn into the shaft's base. Furthermore, all the chambers were interconnected by small oval or ovoid holes, piercing the dividing walls at their floor levels. The function of these



Plate 2. Dromos of the Transitional burial, Ab-Heregil 402. T. 4.

holes remains obscure. However, an assumption that these holes were constructed to facilitate the easy access of the grave owner's soul to the offerings deposited in the other chambers cannot be excluded. Mud bricks, rough stones and even red bricks were used in building chamber-blocking walls (Godlewski 2006, 469-476; Mahmoud el-Tayeb 2007, 71-81). Besides the interconnection between the burial chambers, four of the tombs from Hammur and ez-Zuma were interconnected with the living world, through a tunnel. This extended from the western or southern edge of the mound to either the rear of the main burial chamber or a secondary one (Figure 6).

### The tunnels question!

To date, four tunnels have been discovered in Hammur-Abbassiya and ez-Zuma (Colour plate I), although their function remains obscure. It is interesting to note that the tunnel was found beneath a rounded top mound at both sites although, on the former site the mounds were smaller in size. In both cases all four tunnels were of far larger dimensions than those recorded in Gemai, Ballana, Qustul and Firka (Bates and Dunham 1927; Emery and Kirwan 1938; Kirwan 1939). The 3m and 4m long tunnels, excavated at Hammur-Abbassiya, measured about 1.43m to 1.6m in width and 0.8m to 1m in height. Both of them started from a rectangular pit dug at the extreme western edge of the mound, and culminated in one of the secondary chambers. It is noteworthy that each tomb contains a secondary, extended burial. In addition, each tunnel's external entrance had been carefully blocked with stone slabs and the pits filled with earth. The bones of

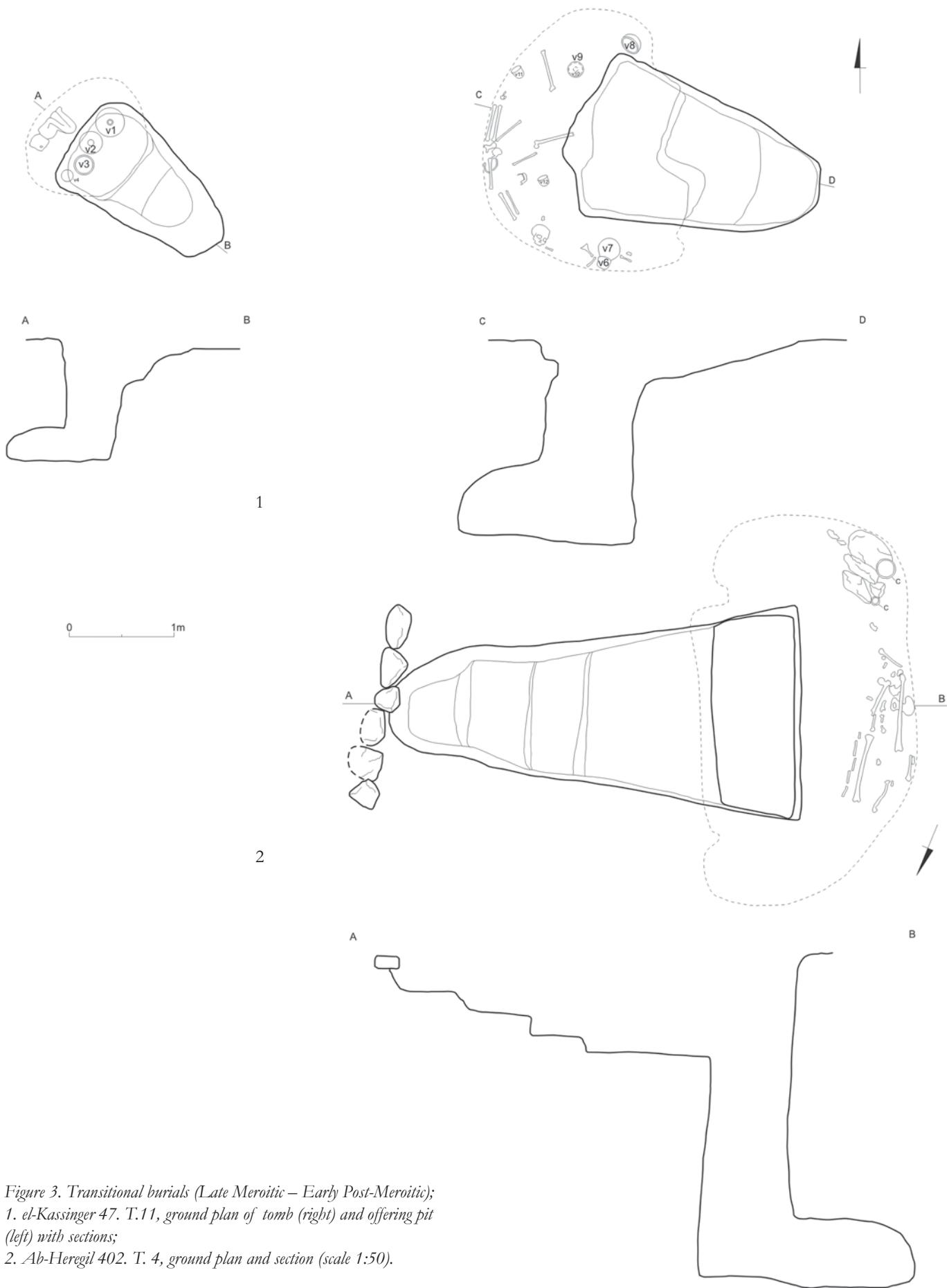
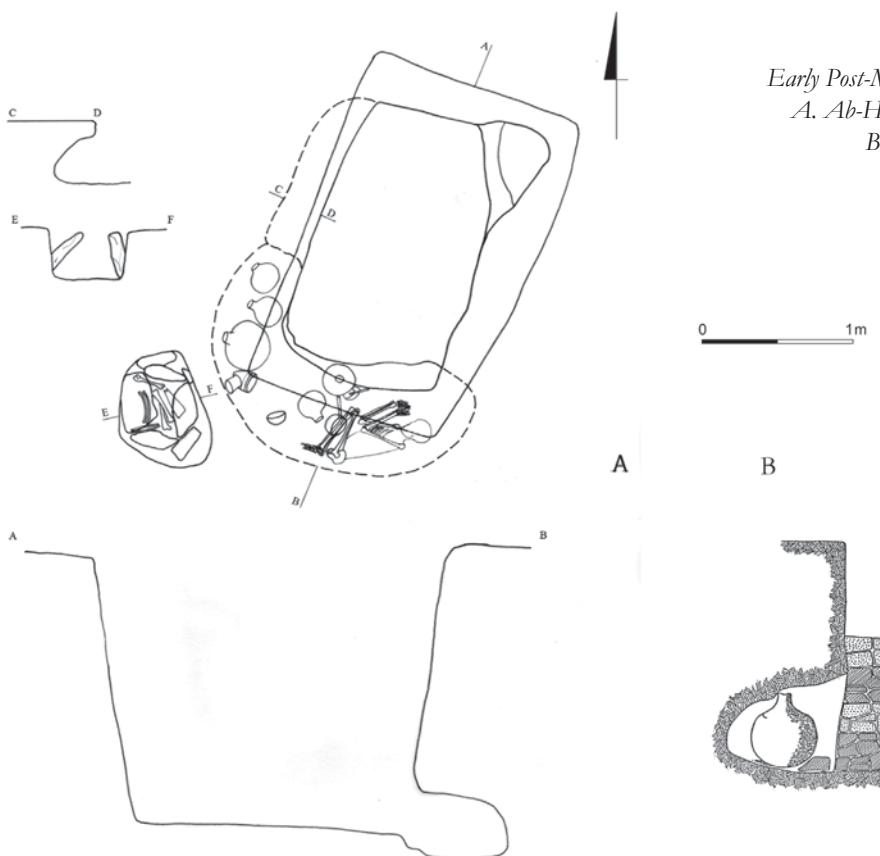


Figure 3. Transitional burials (Late Meroitic – Early Post-Meroitic);  
 1. el-Kassinger 47. T. 11, ground plan of tomb (right) and offering pit  
 (left) with sections;  
 2. Ab-Heregil 402. T. 4, ground plan and section (scale 1:50).

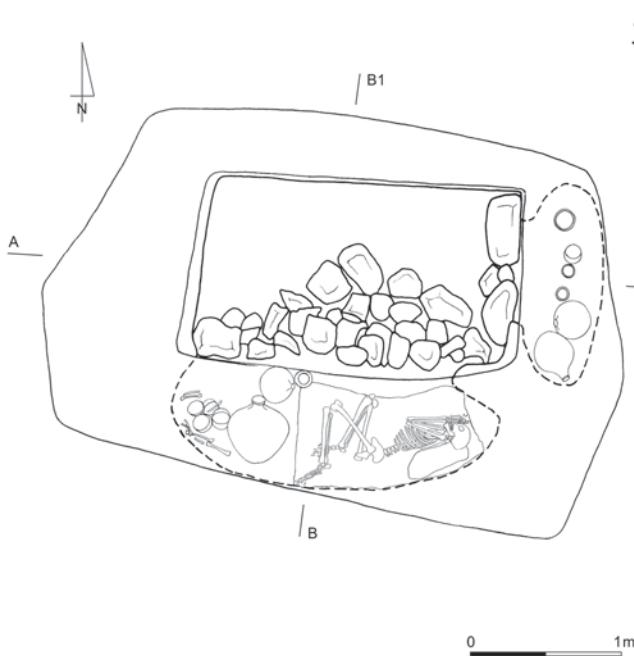


*Figure 4.*  
Early Post-Meroitic burials.  
A. Ab-Heregil 402.T. 2  
B. Tangasi T. II  
(scale 1:50).

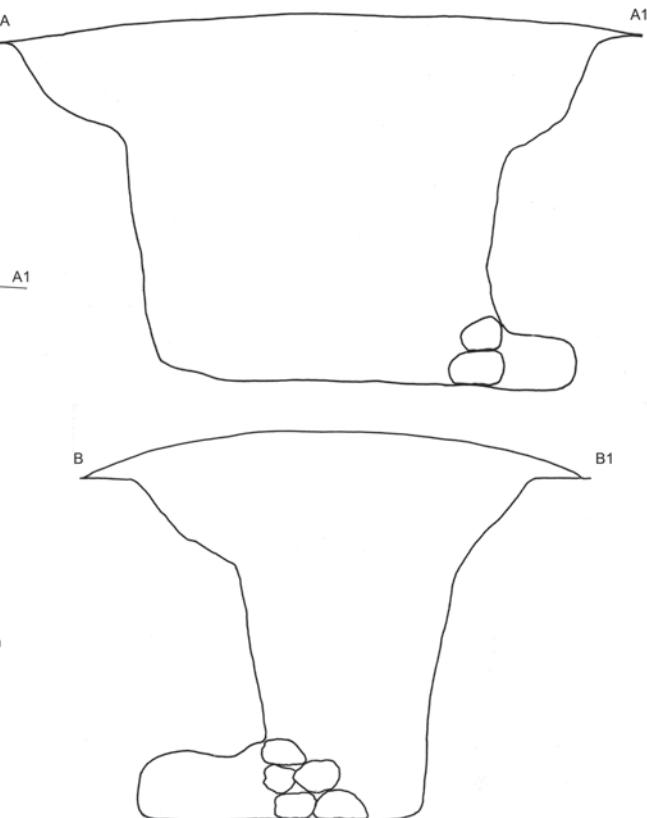
the human skeleton in the main chamber of T.4 had been carefully piled on one side, as if the grave had been prepared to receive another body. This action appears to have nothing to do with robbers' behaviour, more probably it represents

a deeply-rooted mortuary practice, dating back to the Meroitic period. A degree of disturbance was noted in the main burial chambers of T.1 and T.4; however, the discovery of many, almost untouched, grave goods raises the fundamental question of whether the main reason that these burials were penetrated was for reuse, rather than to plunder their contents.

The tunnels discovered in T.2 and T.5 at ez-Zuma were also large. Both the ez-Zuma tunnels started at the southern edge of the tumuli extending directly to the rear of the main burial chamber, contrasting with the previous ones. The one in T.2 was 9m long with a width of 2-3.2m and a height of 0.7-1.3m, while the tunnel in T.5 measured 7.3m in length, 1.28m wide and 1.5m high. In contrast to the two previous tumuli, the main chambers, which were located on the southern side of the shaft, were completely plundered, with the skeletons missing. In the case of T.2 the robbers' sole



*Figure 5.* Late Post-Meroitic burial at el-Kassinger 45. T. 1  
(scale 1:50).



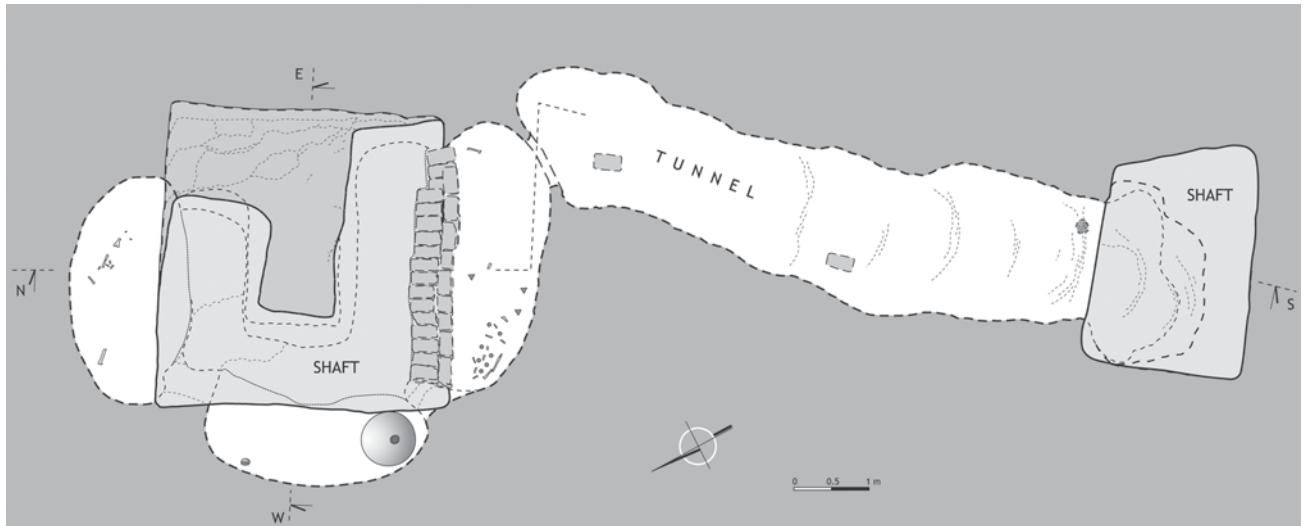


Figure 6. Ground plan of the tunnel and chambers in T.5 at ez-Zuma (scale 1:100).

target was the main burial chamber, while in T.5, chamber 2, which contained only offerings, was robbed. Neither of the two burials was reused like the ones in Hammur. Entrances to both tunnels were not sealed, but filled up naturally. There can be no question that plundering activities had taken place at ez-Zuma; yet, it is very doubtful that the tunnels which had been used as passages to enter the burial chambers were initially dug by grave robbers. Evidence from Gemmai shows that such robber trenches are quite narrow in comparison with the tunnels noted at Hammur and ez-Zuma. In several cases, Bates states that the diggers missed their way to the target. Sometimes it happened that they gave up digging the tunnel and returned to start from the top of the mound, as had been the case with mound E (Bates and Dunham 1927, 73–75). Similar practice has, so far, not been observed in the cemeteries considered here; all the tunnels terminate in or close to the main chamber. The large dimensions of these tunnels and their observable quality of construction strongly suggest that they were used, but not dug by robbers. Another fact supporting this hypothesis is that all ez-Zuma's flat-topped burials were robbed via holes dug from above, even though some are as high as the tombs at Hammur-Abbassyia (for instance tumulus T.11). This being so, one might also have expected these tombs to have been robbed via a tunnel and not from above. To date, the only known example of a grave robbed via a tunnel in the Dongola Reach, although unclearly documented, is Mound I, excavated by Shinnie in Tanqasi, (Shinnie 1954, figs 3 and 4). Consequently, one might suggest that the tunnels' existence at these two specific cemetery fields is not necessarily dictated by the height of the tumulus. Finally, what was the purpose behind such an enormous effort of digging these tunnels? Were they robbers' passages? Was there a ceremonial/liturgical function, or were they the easiest way to allow the reuse of the burial for another inhumation? Only further excavations may help to give an answer to these debatable questions (Figure 6).

### Summary notes on the pottery

Post-Meroitic pottery is quite a significant element in any discussion of this period, both as a mark of identity and as dating material. Unfortunately, until now there has been no comprehensive study either of Meroitic or Post-Meroitic pottery, apart from some articles and reports written on specific sites. Although the latter subject deserves a separate article, I will try to briefly demonstrate features of cultural change and regional characteristics of pottery production in the limited available space. Variation in burial practices in northern and southern Meroitic territories is also noticeable in terms of pottery. Surprisingly, Napatan pottery production, which emanated from Egyptian tradition, had only negligible impact on Early Meroitic pottery, excepting a type of wheel-made, red-slipped, deep cup, spouted bowl - and bowls with untreated surfaces (Garstang 1911, pl. XLII, 5, 7; Rose 1998, 144, 158–59, 162, fig. 6.16; Welsby 2008, 38, pl. 12). Evidently, the black handmade pottery represents the original ware whose antecedents lie in the Neolithic period. However, in the Early Meroitic repertoire (4<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC), both wheel and handmade wares were limited. It mainly comprised of bowls of different profiles and beer jars, with a rounded body, short neck and wide mouth. Black ware was more common, although production comprised of both black and red wares, black ware being more common, especially in the south, while it slowly diminished towards the north. Decoration mainly consisted of impressed dots, often in a geometrical design, and also reflected the savannah environment, with depictions of animals, birds, plants and human figures, indigenous to the region (Woolley and MacIver 1910, 52; Griffith 1924, pls XXVI, XXXIII; Edwards 1991, 45–47; Rose 1996, 119–20, figs 4.1, 4.2, 4.3). In the Classical period (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC – 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD), or shortly afterwards, wheel-made painted pottery dominated a widespread area – between the First and the Sixth Cataracts – and was produced in major Meroitic centres, such as Meroe itself, Musawwarat es-Sufra and Faras. The repertoire of this phase is consistently rich in every

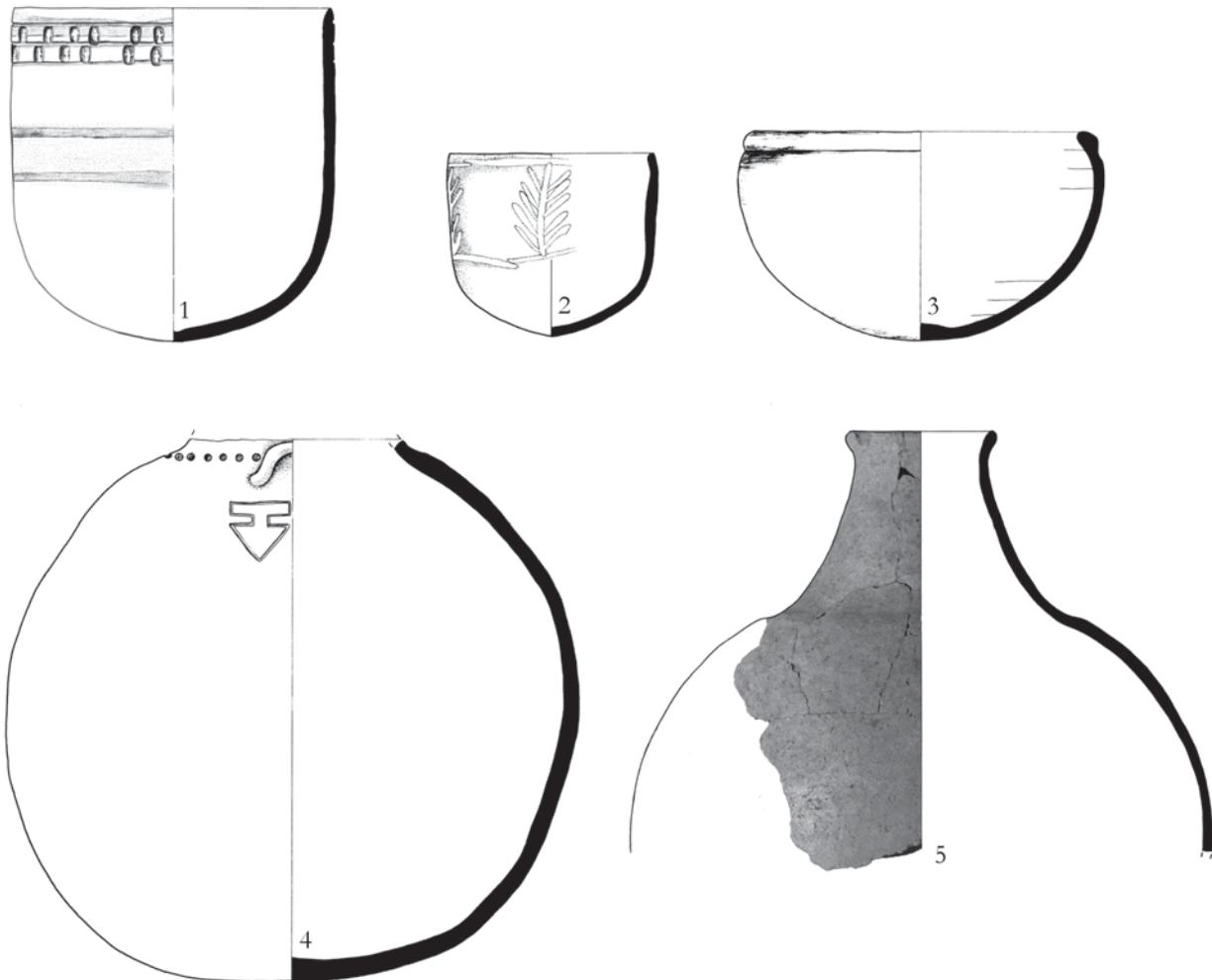


Figure 7. Transitional pottery (Late Meroitic – Early Post-Meroitic); 1. el-Kassinger 47. T.9.6; 2. el-Kassinger 47. T. 9.7; 3. el-Kassinger 47. T. 11; 4. Umm Gibier 801. T. 11; 5. Umm Gibier 801. T. 5 (various scales).

respect: vessel forms, manufacturing technique, decoration. Many motifs used in painted decoration were derived from earlier traditions, with continued use of dotted-impressed motifs and representations of human figures, animals, birds, reptiles, plants and some ceremonial scenes despite northern inspiration from Roman Egypt. Religious symbolism is a new element appearing in these motifs, enriching the decorative patterns (Woolley and MacIver 1910, pls 43-85; Griffith 1924, vol. XI. 4; Shinnie 1967, 114-131; Grzymski 1989, 75, pls XIV- XV). One might ask, what happened to handmade production at this time? Was any pottery produced by hand, or did it completely disappear to “revive” again in the Post-Meroitic period? A definitive answer to this question might be possible when many more ‘common’ graves have been both discovered and excavated, for most of the material studied hitherto was obtained from elite burials. According to some historical sources, later confirmed by archaeological evidence, the Kingdom underwent a period of decline, weakness and poverty - for various reasons - in the late phase of its existence (Adams 1977, 383-90). The end of the heartland’s centralised authority seemed to be followed by the demise

of the workshops which produced wheel-made pottery, at this crucial time. There was, evidently, a gradually increasing decline until a point at which these workshops ceased to exist. The production of black and dark brown, handmade ware was predominant in the Late Meroitic and Early Post-Meroitic periods. Characteristic forms in the assemblage were distinctive ovoid-bodied beer jars, with long, inward-sloping necks, narrow mouths and flared rims. Bowls were typically represented by two forms: large and medium-sized closed bowls with smoothed, burnished surfaces, open, ledged-rims bowls and bowls with bevelled rims. Characteristic decoration was still the dot-impressed pattern, in different forms, occasionally in filled with red, or white, or with short notches on top of the rim (Marshall and Abd el-Rahman Adam 1953, 40-46; Lenoble 1987a, 233, fig. 4.4; Edwards 1991, 43-45, fig. 5, pls II-III).

Several scholars distinguish this new period by the appearance of a type of large, handmade beer jar. This distinctive type has a rounded body, decorated with a distinctive mat-impressed pattern. The long, broad neck is, as a rule, covered with a red slip, while the shoulders and body are



Plate 3. Transitional pottery (Late Meroitic – Early Post-Meroitic) from Ab-Heregil 402. T. 4.

often decorated with red slipped stripes, in a horizontal, or zigzag pattern. Although this type was characteristic of the Early Post-Meroitic period, its production was maintained with continuous evolution in form and decoration into the late Post-Meroitic period. So far, nothing is known of its origin, but most probably it was manufactured in professional workshops in the Shendi Reach. Its range of distribution extended as far north as the Dongola Reach, but it has not been recorded in the Gezira, so far (Garstang 1911, 38-42; Lenoble 1987, pls XII, XV; Phillips 1987, 35-41; Lenoble 1994, 51-88; Rose 1998, 142-186; Phillips and Mahmoud el-Tayeb 2003, 458-462; Lemiesz 2005, 372-73; Żurawski 2006, 453; Mohamed Farouq *et al.* 2007, 11, fig. 6, pl. LIV).

Northern Nubia's situation was quite different, for archaeological evidence in this region attests to the ceramic industry's independent development meaning that the collapse of Meroe's central power had no direct impact upon ceramic production. Production of wheel-made pottery continued until the end of the Christian period (Figure 7, Colour plate II). As hitherto stated, pottery is a significant chronological indicator. Hence, the division of this period into Early and Late is primarily based on pottery typology. The Early Post-Meroitic period is characterised by the appearance of the already mentioned large beer jars, covered with mat-impressed decoration, mainly recovered from graves exhibiting strong southern influence, such as grave II at Tanqasi (Shinnie 1954, 70-72, figs 4-5). Tumulus ROM 32/1, at Jebel Ghaddar northern cemetery, represents another early burial type in which beer jars are associated with a number of small, wheel-made, red-ware vessels (Phillips 1987). These include bowls, plus two types of small cups, comprising short ones, with an almost semi-globular body and rounded base, and tall cups with straight sides and semi-flat bases. Both types are decorated with single or double grooves incised just above the base. This type of vessel appears to be of Nobadian not local origin (Williams 1991, pls 253, fig. c, 279, fig. d). Late Post-Meroitic pottery has a very rich and elaborate repertoire, most typi-

cally a type of small, wheel-made red bowl, decorated with horizontal grooves incised either just below the rim or half way down the body. Neither the execution of these grooves is identical, nor the manufacture of the vessels themselves. Variations in vessel forms and in the grooved decoration, as well as their widespread distribution throughout the region, undoubtedly indicate that they were locally produced in different workshops throughout the Dongola Reach. Other wheel-made bowls include another type of similar dimensions to those mentioned, although these are distinguished by a red burnish on the undecorated surface and variance in the method of construction. A new, medium size, type of red, handmade beer jar/bottle, with an ovoid body and long, narrow, neck and mouth also appeared in this period. On the low shoulders, are two distinctive bosses symmetrically placed opposite each other. Yet other cup and bowl forms are to be found amongst this later group, some of which, most probably, represent an evolution of some Meroitic types. Other handmade vessels in a light brown ware, so far only recorded in an area of northern Nubia, are a kind of bowl (pan?) of various sizes. These are usually roughly made, with a thickened base, with added clay to facilitate heat dispersal (Klimaszewska-Drabot 2006, 487, figs 13.3, 14) (Figure 8).

Three other vessel types are worth mentioning. Firstly, a wheel-made bowl, which appears in various forms and sizes, from the Early Meroitic period. It is heavy, with a hemispherical shape and flat rim and with either a ring, or a flat base. The body is usually untreated. The second, dating to a similar period and similarly distributed to the aforementioned, from

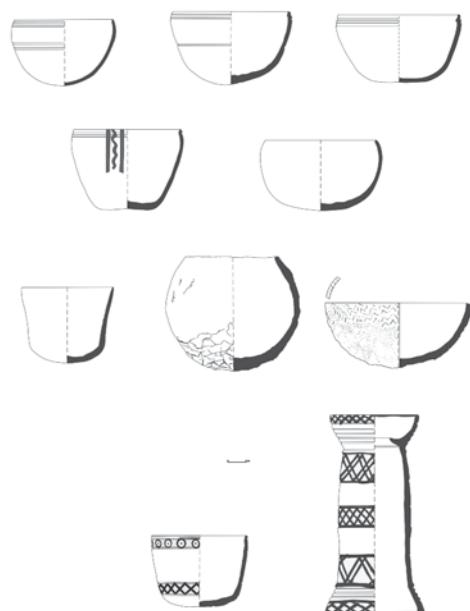


Figure 8. Late Post-Meroitic pottery from ez-Zuma T. 23.

north to south, is a large, handmade, spouted bowl of open or closed form. The last form is a small, open, bowl of light brown ware. These vessels, usually very roughly made, are often found as single examples in large assemblages of semi-fine, wheel-made vessels. Moreover, this rough bowl



Plate 4. Late Post-Meroitic pottery, from *ez-Zuma* T. 2. 33.

has not yet been noted elsewhere in Nubia, apart from in Late Post-Meroitic burials in the Dongola Reach. Apparently, these distinctive vessels are evidence of cultural continuity, as they probably had a liturgical function, in particular during libation rites connected with the funerary banquet of the Isis



Plate 6. Liturgical vessel from *ez-Zuma* T. 19.4.



Plate 7. Liturgical vessel from *ez-Zuma* T. 23. 30.



Plate 5. Late Post-Meroitic pottery from *ez-Zuma* T. 10.

cult (Plates 6 and 7). During the Late Post-Meroitic period, imported wheel-made pottery frequently appeared in burials. Large beer jars, bottles and table amphorae attest to strong relations between peoples in this region, Lower Nubia and Upper Egypt (Figure 9, Plates 8, 10 and 11).

To conclude, today, many years after Kirwan's early excavations, much work has been undertaken, especially in the last four decades. Our knowledge of the Post-Meroitic period has

increased dramatically, yet there are still many unsolved problems, particularly in the region from the Third Cataract to the Gezira in the south. Each of the questions given consideration above deserves a separate research project, not only an article. However, this paper is an attempt to demonstrate some archaeological factors which may help in understanding changes that occurred in Meroitic society from its early days until the formation of the independent Nubian political entities of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The Meroitic state's administrative system was based at several centres, dominated – at a certain period – by the central authorities in Meroe. This division was most probably dictated by natural geographic factors, as well as the societal composition of the vast Meroitic kingdom. Hence, in this case diversity was an essential element, reflected in the material culture. Another factor which should be borne in mind is the influence of Hellenistic/Roman Egypt in the northern part of Nubia. All of these factors collectively lead – in my opinion – to the conclusion that, unlike the conventional theory of the “end of Meroe”, Meroitic society gradually underwent a long process of change and evolution, until the final conversion to Christianity. According to the recent state of knowledge, it is not reasonable to speak about the period that followed the end of the Meroitic kingdom as

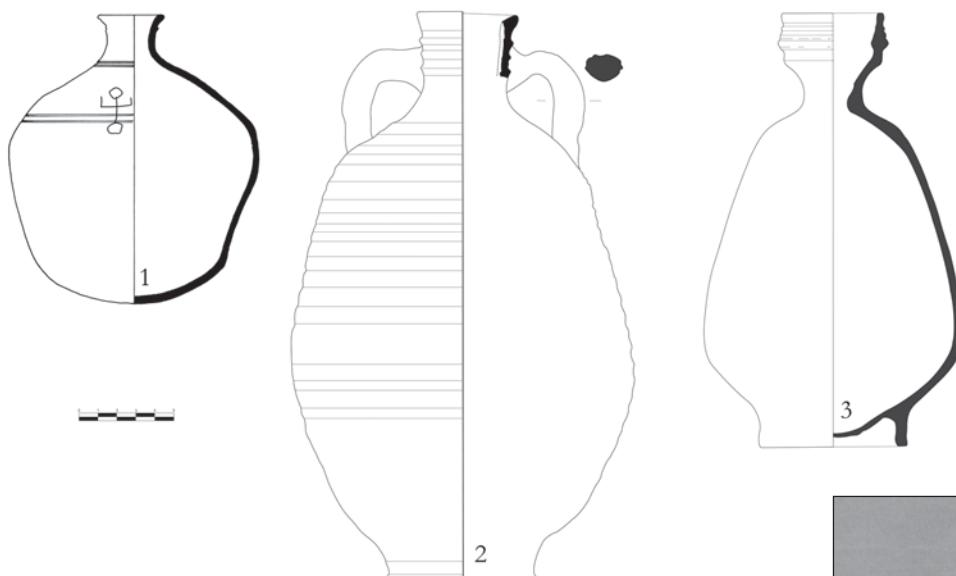


Figure 9. Imported pottery; 1. el-Kassinger 45. T. 1; 2. ez-Zuma T. 2. 32; 3. ez-Zuma T. 23.31 (scale 1:4).



Plate 8. Imported pottery from el-Kassinger 45. T. 18.



Plate 9. Imported pottery from ez-Zuma T. 10. 7.

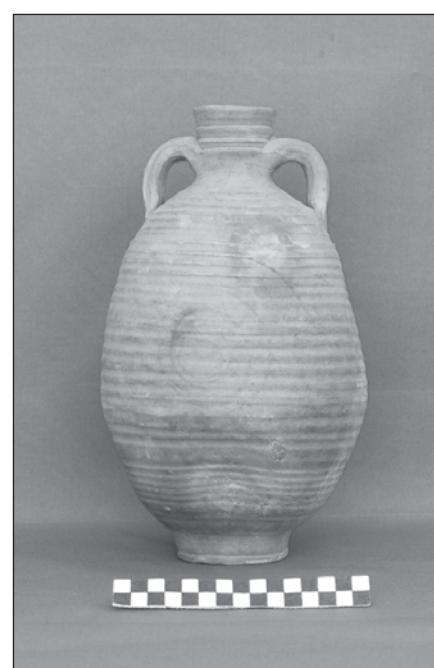


Plate 10. Imported pottery ez-Zuma T. 2. 32.



Plate 11. Imported pottery from ez-Zuma T. T. 23. 1.

one entity, even if it falls within a general cultural framework. Regional characteristics are obvious in each of the abovementioned geographical zones from the First Cataract to the southern part of the Gezira, as far as Kosti and Sennar on the White and Blue Niles. It is hard to deny that there was a degree of infiltration of some tribal people into the Nile Valley, from the west or east, not necessarily in considerable numbers, a process still occurring in recent times. The



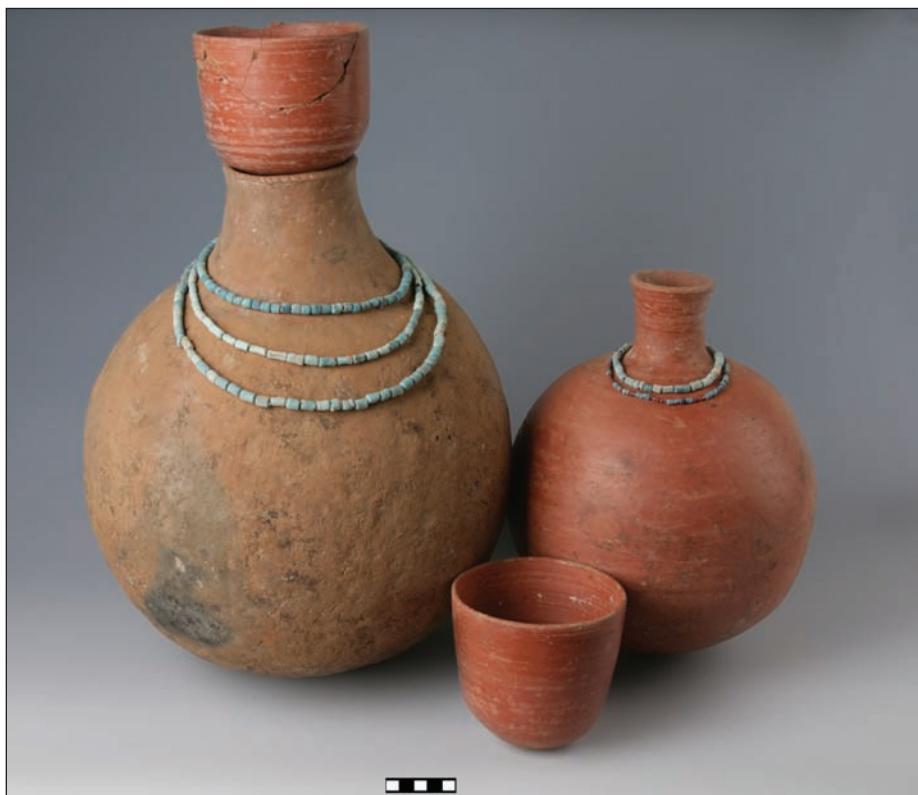
rise of the three kingdoms of Nobadia, Makuria and Alodia is clear evidence of the regional diversity which characterised the late Meroitic period. For many archaeologists and historians, Ezana's inscription recording Noba occupation in the Nile valley is no longer convincing. Yet, in this process, cultural changes in Meroitic society are clear, while proof of deep ethnic changes must await further studies.

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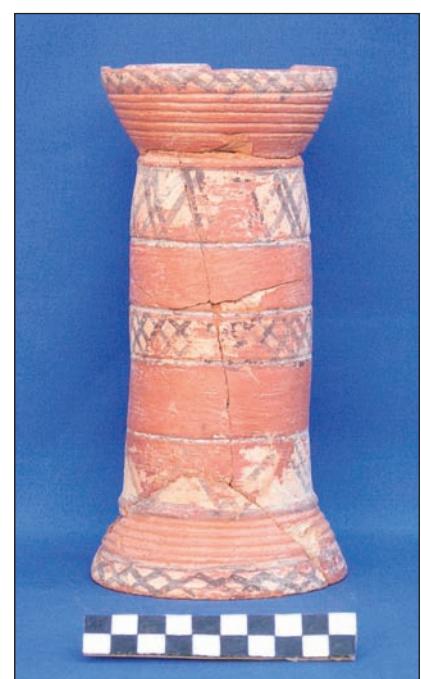
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Colour plate I. The Post-Meroitic.  
Ez-Zuma T. 5, the tunnel looking north.



Colour plate II. Transitional pottery (Late Meroitic – Early Post-Meroitic)  
from el-Kassinger 47. T. 9.



Colour plate III. Late Post-Meroitic pottery  
from ez-Zuma T. 23.40.