

# SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



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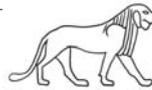




The map reflects the new territorial situation following the independence of South Sudan in July 2011.

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# A preliminary report on mortuary practices and social hierarchy in Akad cemetery

Mohamed Faroug Abd el-Rahman

## Introduction

Akad is a district located within ed-Damer, the capital of River Nile State. Fifty six burials have been excavated during seven seasons<sup>1</sup> in the Akad cemetery. The outcome of these excavations demonstrates the continuing social activity of the Akadian society from the Post-Meroitic to the medieval period. Due to the extension of modern settlement to the east, it seems that many burials may remain undiscovered beneath the present houses. Despite the small number of excavated graves, the cemetery provides considerable information on mortuary practices and Akadian society. The fact that the elite during the Post-Meroitic period used their ancestors' symbols to demonstrate their social and political power is invaluable for the study of social hierarchy. This preliminary study relies on grave goods as indications of social persona and social rank.

Saxe (1970, 118) argues that the structure of burial practice reflects the form of social organization. It is expected that the linearity between the depth of persona and the significance and value of the grave goods should increasingly differentiate and show ranking in that society. The divergence in social persona is correlated to complexity of the sociocultural system. Binford (1971) states that the correlation between the social rank of the deceased and the facets of their social persona (age, sex, social position, etc) can be expected to reflect the social persons' dimensions in society. Hodder (1982, 196-9) points out that this hypothesis does not always explain why and when this legitimization of social ranks and rights happens, before or after death, and who assigns these values. The generalizations here can ignore or miss the possibility of changes in societies in the past and, therefore, exceptions to the rule always existed. Pearson argues that mortuary practice reflects the social status of the funeral organizers and the deceased as part of the event itself. In this new approach, grave goods reflect aspects of identity and actions of people to indicate their relationships to the deceased and the deceased's identity. Status here is subject to manipulation. Honour and sacredness are often considered more important than wealth and ownership in organizing society's values (Pearson 2000, 83-84). Nevertheless, the Meroitic elite's burials were associated with symbolic objects and valuable exotic goods. Post-Meroitic elites relied on the

symbols of the earlier Meroitic state to reflect their social and political status as indicated by burials from el-Hobagi (Lenoble and Sharif 1992). Meroitic elite burials are characterized by exotic objects such as Meroitic offering tables, ceramic fine ware, copper-alloy objects, archer's rings, libation bottles and bead nets, whereas the Post-Meroitic burials are recognized by the same Meroitic objects in addition to new items such as large spears, more archer's rings, libation bottles, footed bowls, large beer jars and censers. Since the size of a grave's superstructure is also considered to reflect the social and political status of individuals, I would consider that the degree of energy expenditure in making the substructure is also correlated to individuals' social rank, as suggested by Tainter (1975, 1977).

The Akad cemetery was first established during the Post-Meroitic period in the south adjacent to Khor Fileifla and subsequently extended towards the north (Figure 1). Pottery was present in 22 burials with quantities varying from one to 43 vessels. Other symbolic objects such as metal objects and beads greatly increased the number of grave goods in some burials. From the correlation of sex and objects in the Akad burials, it was possible to determine the social hierarchy and how the people of Akad performed and pursued the Meroitic mortuary practices. The data presented in this study consists of burial structure, artifacts associated with burial ceremonies and the distribution of the sexes. It is essential to note that the sample size of the excavated burials with grave goods is too small to run statistical analysis and, therefore, more archaeological survey and excavations in the middle Nile region are required to determine Akad's position in the sociopolitical context/s after the decline of the Kushite state.

## The cemetery

The absence of valuable and imported objects from Akad cemetery such as copper-alloy vessels might indicate limited access to imported objects from the north and/or the decline of the Meroitic workshops. It is also obvious that the Akad community did not have or control local resources to increase their wealth and power in the area, although they maintained their contact and connection with different communities to the north and the south as indicated previously (Mohamed *et al.* 2007) and reflected in the use of double-shaft graves, grave goods and mortuary practices. The square-shaft burial T.23 at Akad reflects multiple beliefs within the people of Akad. The burial was supposed to be carved east-west with a burial chamber to the west as is shown on the western wall (Plate 1). However, during the digging of the grave it is clear that the people realized that the deceased should be buried in a square-shaft burial instead of a descending east-west shaft burial. The modification of this substructure together with the Post-Meroitic pottery fragments from the shaft indicate the contemporaneous usage of the square-shaft grave and the descending shaft burials in the cemetery. The rectangular south-north shaft burials were located amongst the Post-

<sup>1</sup> The rescue excavations at Akad were supported by the National Corporation for the Antiquities and Museums, Sudan Telecommunication Company (Sudatel), the Sudan Archaeological Research Society, the Greek community in Khartoum and the Headquarters of the Tourism Office in Atbara.



Plate 1. Modification of burial substructure in burial 23 in Akad cemetery.

Meroitic burials (Figure 1). It is obvious that south-north square and rectangular shafts have more pottery sherds than descending shafts (Figure 2). The deceased in the rectangular-shaft burials were found always in an extended east-west position with their heads to the west. The deceased in square-shaft burials were found in the same position except at burial T.23 where the body was found in a contracted position, but still with the head located to the west. From these observations, I conclude that these three burial types demonstrate two different beliefs as indicated by similar pottery types from all burials but in different contexts. According to the performance of the Meroitic religion in Akad society, the rituals can be identified as follows:

Rituals were performed and completed by placing grave goods inside the burial chambers. Examples of these rituals are the hearth at burial T.34 (Plate 2) and the placement of burned palm fronds in shafts. The fronds ritual is associ-



Plate 2. Hearth probably used for rituals during the burial ceremony at T. 34

ated with Isis and probably reflects Isis-worship (Abdelgadir 1982; Gasmelseed 2004; Mohamed *et al.* 2007).

Where there are no grave goods with the extended burials, rituals were performed and completed by throwing pottery fragments into the fill of the shaft. This practice is associated with the Osiris cult.

Rituals were performed and completed with no placement of objects in the burial chambers or shafts. This may also reflect the Osiris cult.

Fragments of pottery vessels were found mainly in square-shaft burials (Figure 2). These vessels consist of incense burners, pot stands, bowls or footed bowls. These fragments were found randomly in the fill of shafts or intentionally in blocking walls between bricks as part of the ceremonial rituals (Plate 3). The same rituals are found in earlier tombs at el-Kurru where mourners had used vessels for the burial feast and smashed them inside of these tombs (Kendall

1999) and in burial no. 800 in the northern necropolis at Meroe (Török 1997, 236). Breaking the red pots<sup>2</sup> was mentioned in the Pyramid texts and is associated with Osiris who was worshipped during the Meroitic period:

O [Osiris the King], here is the Eye of Horus; [take] it, that you may be strong and that he may fear you—break the red vases

(Faulkner 1969, 58).



Plate 3. Fragments of pottery vessels from a square shaft.

The ritual of breaking red vases is well attested from burial practices in ancient Egypt and Kush, especially in elites' burials. The most dramatic example of the Osirian belief was found in the burials of the royal family in the royal cemeteries of Meroe and the western cemetery (Dunham 1950; 1957; 1963). It is also found in burials at Sedeinga, Gebel Adda, and Faras in the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, at el-Kadada (Geus

<sup>2</sup> It is possible that the symbolic breaking of pots was not confined to red ones, but utilized others of differing colours.



Figure 1. Excavated graves in the Akad cemetery.

and Lenoble 1985) and el-Hobagi (Lenoble 1989). Obviously, the Akadian society continuously practiced the Osiris cult after the decline of the Kushite state. Lenoble (1995) argued

that the continuation of use of libation bottles reflects the Isis and Anubis cult during the Meroitic and Post-Meroitic periods and is reflected in their mortuary practices. This cult was demonstrated not only by libation bottles but also

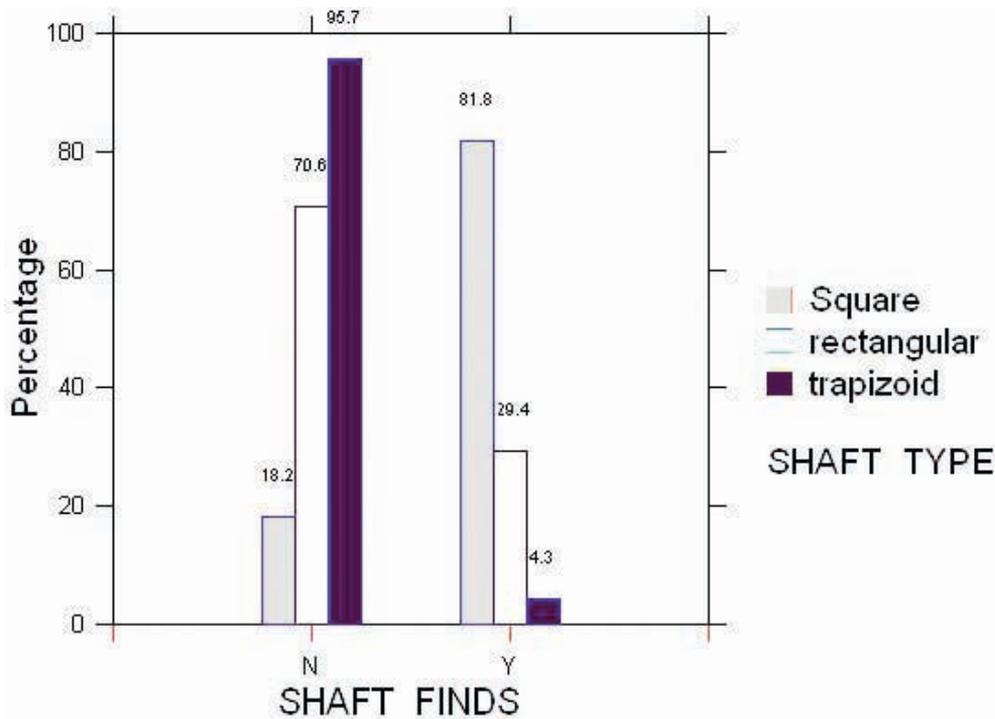


Figure 2. The presence and absence of pottery sherds related to shaft types.

The discovery of a copper-alloy chatelaine could be as significant as any symbol of prestige or power. The middle class in the Akad community may be represented by graves in the second and the third row (Figure 1). Their burials were accompanied by few pottery vessels but still contained plates and incense burners, a pot stand and bowls. Considering the energy invested in the underlined burials (Figure 3) together with the Osiris cult, I identify them as individuals from the middle class. This consideration is based on the investment of energy not only in square-shaft burials but also the double-shaft burials such as

by plates and cups as well as dog sacrifices (Mohamed *et al.* 2007) at Akad. However, these rituals and objects were also found in the Meroe necropolis (Dunham 1950; 1957; 1963) and demonstrate the connection of the Akad people with their Meroitic ancestors.

There were two clusters of burials, the double-descendary shafts and the square shafts located in the southern part of the cemetery. These clusters might represent two different kin groups or sects that held different beliefs and retained their significant religious rituals. They were also represented by multiple interments in one burial as in T.8, 4, 21, 47, 34, but they lacked symbols of rank. Since grave goods were associated mainly with the descending shafts, I consider the finds from square shafts as indicating rituals that might be associated with the social persona.

From the distribution of objects in Akad cemetery, female burials have more goods than male burials. Similar to the Meroitic way, it seems females maintained and demonstrated their social position in their burials. In Akad, plates and footed bowls are represented with 61.7% in female burials compared to 38.3% in male burials. The burial T.29 contained 59 objects and represented the highest social rank in the cemetery (Figure 3). The symbols of power and social rank in T.29 were indicated by a large spear head, four archers' rings and two knives. Beer jars were found together with other common vessels for the first time in this burial in addition to remains of a funerary banquet. The role of beer in festive occasions was to enhance social interactions and to create status (Mandelbaum 1965). Beer had also been incorporated as part of the ritual in Kushite mortuary practice and the socioeconomic relations (Edwards 1996). The banquet is represented by collective receptacles in the burial, identified by Lenoble as an indication of the highest-ranking graves (Lenoble 1999, 252-253).

T.21 and the small number of artifacts associated with the deceased. More information about the square-shaft burials from other cemeteries in the middle Nile region is required to carry this discussion further.

## Conclusion

The distribution of finds in the cemetery at Akad indicates the low level of prosperity and the existence of different beliefs at the same time. The absence of any Meroitic burials or even Meroitic objects such as fineware in the cemetery is noteworthy. It is possible that the Akadian people moved to the area some time after the decline of the Kushite state but from the vicinity of Meroe and continued to perform Meroitic rituals. This was recognized from their maintenance of Meroitic symbols and the performance of the earlier Meroitic mortuary practices. Social rank was identified simply by the density of artifacts and symbols and indicated that the females were associated with grave goods more than males reflecting their social rank among the society of Akad, while males had fewer vessels but archers' ring/s were included. More excavation at Akad and in adjacent areas will enrich our knowledge and shed more light on the Post-Meroitic social and political structure before the arrival of Christianity. Further studies in the study area will help to place the society of Akad within the regional sociocultural context after the decline of the Kushite state.

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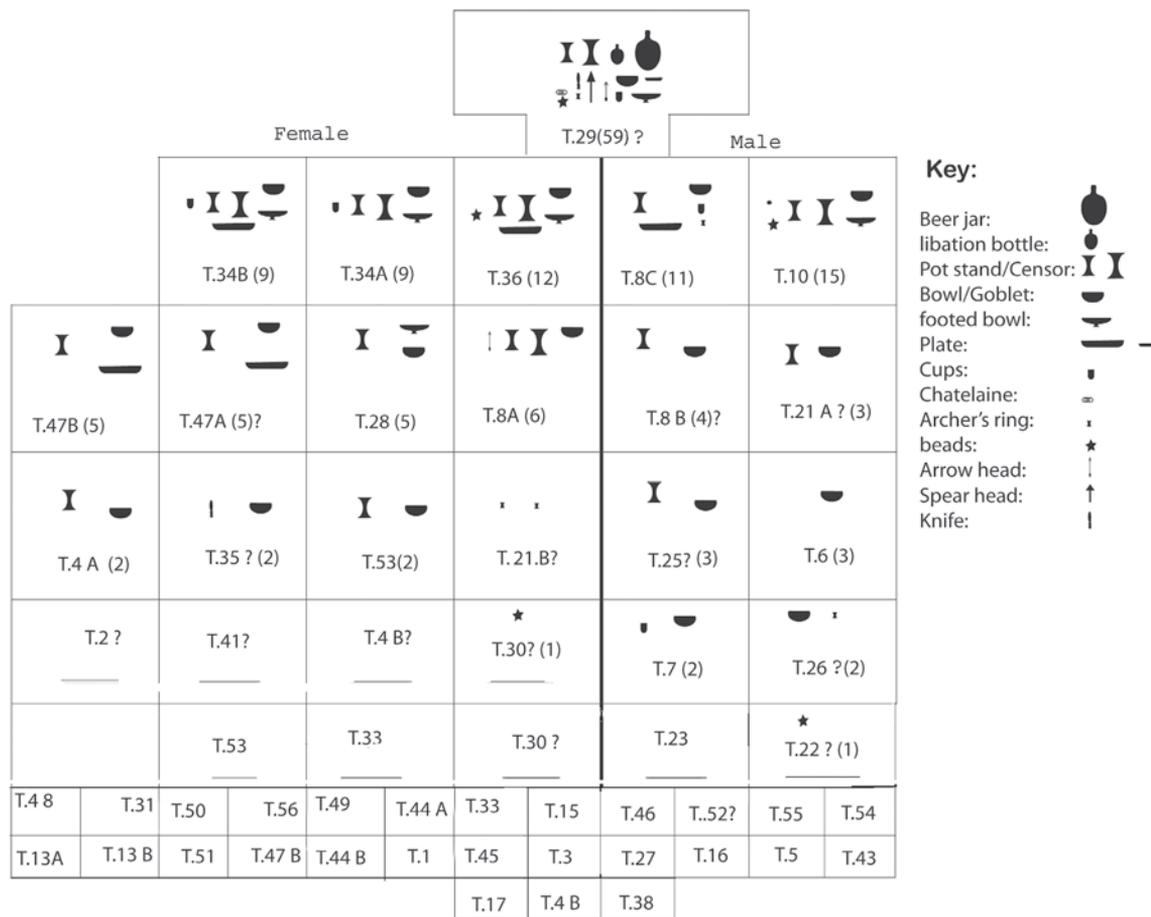


Figure 3. Social ranking in the Akad cemetery.

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