

Excavations in the Meroitic Cemetery at Berber, Seasons 2015 and 2016

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Two short seasons of archaeological excavation were conducted at Berber cemetery in August 2015 and in May 2016.¹ The excavations concentrated in the pyramids area, which had been identified in the previous seasons (Figure 1). The main objective was to finish the excavations in the second tomb (BMC 38b) under pyramid BMC 38 and to continue excavation to allow a better understanding of the tomb structures and the burial traditions in this part of the cemetery.

Pyramid BMC 38

Two tombs had been distinguished by the clear whitish colour of their filling beneath the pyramid; BMC 38a was excavated in season 2013 (Mahmoud Suliman Bashir and David 2015, 99). The excavation in BMC 38b was conducted in 2015. The tomb cut of BMC 38b was located under the southern wall of the pyramid, therefore, in order to excavate this tomb we removed part of the superstructure. This tomb consisted of an east-west sloping descenary leading to an oval-shaped east-west burial niche at its western end. The fill in the descenary was a mixture of soft clay soil and pebbles. A disturbed mud-brick blocking wall was revealed at the depth of 700mm. The burial had been disturbed by robbers and only some long bones were found articulated indicating that the skeleton had been laid in an extended position.

Pyramid BMC 39

This tomb has a square superstructure of mud bricks which was most probably a pyramid. Only one row of bricks survived. It was discovered after surface clearance in the 2013 season (Mahmoud Suliman Bashir and David 2015, 97), but recently it had been partially destroyed by modern robber activities in January 2015.

We started cleaning the modern robber pit, which cuts the blockage area. A large number of mud bricks from the blockage were found removed from their original place. The descenary filling consisted of gravels and clay soil. The burial niche was observed at a depth of 500mm oriented north-

south. It is an oval shaped burial, deep and narrow, measuring (940mm east-west, 1.3m north-south). Its fill consisted of grey soil and pebbles. The skeleton was disturbed.

A second tomb was found over the western end of the burial niche where its fill was observed (Plate 1). Remains of wood, probably parts of a bed, were found in the fill at the depth of 800mm. In the south-west corner was a pottery jar found at a depth 640mm from the surface of the superstructure. This corner also contained large pieces of wood. Within the jar were remains of seeds and two iron rods. These are probably the remains of tangs from spear or arrowheads. Under this level at the depth of 1.2m we found a skeleton in flexed position oriented east-west, the head to the west facing north, the right arm flexed and placed across the left one near the distal end; the left hand rests in front of the chest. There were traces of yellow ochre in the south-west corner. In front of the body were two small pottery bowls and a third of copper alloy. A piece of faience inscribed with the name of Shabaqo was found near the ankle of the body.



Plate 1. BMC 39a and b.

Pyramid BMC 43

This pyramid was identified after surface clearance in the 2013 season. It is a square shaped mud-brick structure with a chapel to the east. Some parts are missing and the structure is in a poor state of preservation. A structure of four mud bricks in a line was also found about 1.22m to the east of the northern chapel wall. Between this structure and the chapel, a sandstone block shaped like a stela, was recovered. It is in a very poor state of preservation and it is very difficult to see if it bore an inscription.

Pyramid BMC 43 was associated with two tombs BMC 54 and 55. Both tombs have short, steep descendaries leading to a cave-like burial chamber oriented east-west. Tomb BMC 55 contained an extended burial in a wooden coffin oriented

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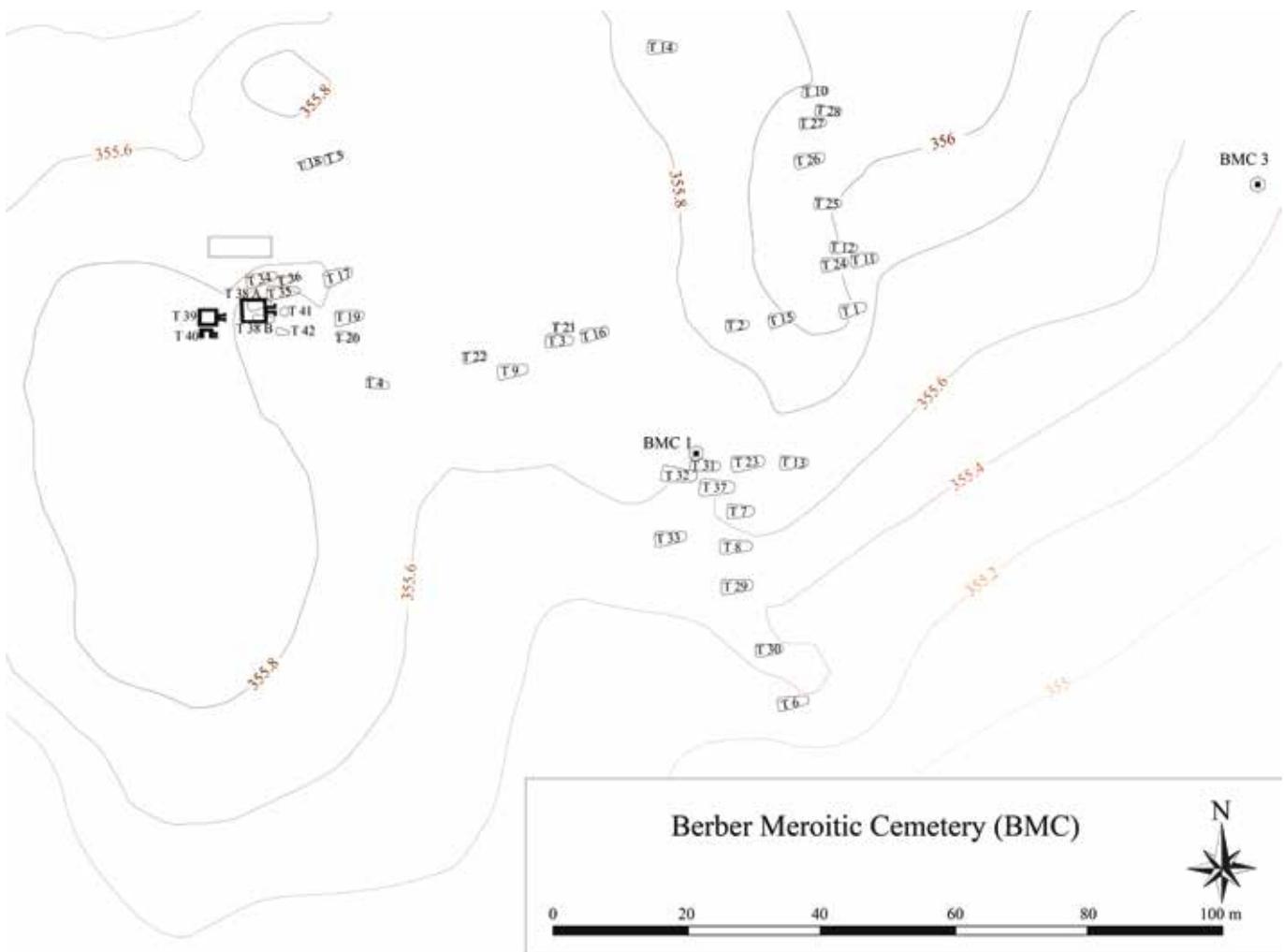


Figure 1. Plan showing tombs distribution and the pyramids area.

west-east with the head to the west. In tomb BMC 54 the burial chamber is an oval-shaped niche oriented north-south within which the body was in a semi-flexed position oriented north-south with the head to the south. A potsherd, used as a digging tool, was found in the filling of the burial in tomb BMC 54 and traces of robber activities were observed in the disturbed blockage and inside the burial.

It is clear that this pyramid is built over these two tombs (BMC 54, 55), but when cleaning inside the pyramid structure an earlier tomb was discovered over BMC 55 beneath the northern side of the structure and extended under its western wall. This tomb BMC 57 is similar to BMC 39b. It is a rectangular pit filled with a very soft clay soil. In this fill, a pottery pilgrim bottle and two large bowls were found at a depth of about 500mm. A second pottery bowl with a hole in its base was found in a lower level, at a depth of about 700mm.

The skeleton in semi-flexed position on the right side was found oriented west-east, the head to the west facing south. The hands are in front of the face, the right hand being very close to it (Plate 2). The left leg rested on the right one. It is clear that the body lay on a wooden bed; the remaining parts of the bed frame measured 800mm in width, and 1.38m long,



Plate 2. The skeleton in BMC 57.

each about 80mm in diameter. A bed leg, in poor condition, was found in the upper fill in the north-west corner.

Pyramid BMC 44

This pyramid had been revealed after surface clearance. It is a mud-brick pyramid badly eroded and only the impression of mud bricks can be seen in some parts. It is located about

50m to the south west of the area where the pyramids are concentrated in an elevated part of the cemetery. A structure of three mud bricks in a line was found about 1.84m to the east of the chapel wall similar to those in BMC 43.

The large descenary, identified by the loose fill, was located beneath pyramid BMC 44 and started about 5.8m east of the pyramid structure. A tomb of a child, with a short descenary, had been cut in the northern wall of the BMC 44 descenary. The child's tomb contained a burial oriented east-west, the skeleton in a contracted position with the torso facing down. This tomb is located 3.5m east to the pyramid structure.

The descenary in BMC 44 led to a cave-like burial chamber oriented east-west. A blockage of seven courses of mud bricks sealed the burial. Inside the burial chamber the intact skeleton was in an extended position within a wooden coffin oriented east-west with the head to the west. The coffin was longer than the burial chamber and the foot end extends out of the burial and the mud-brick wall of the blockage built around it (Plate 3). The box-shaped coffin was made of wood and was in a poor condition. It tapers in width toward the feet.

Two objects were found in this tomb, a wheel-made pottery jar with a large mouth most probably from earlier date on the basis of its form (Plate 3), and a deep copper-alloy beaker, a unique object decorated with reliefs of gods, human, animals and floral motifs (Plate 4). The images from the preliminary study before conservation and cleaning of the object, shows five registers of reliefs the lower part with a lotus flower on the base of the cup. Each register is separate and they are divided one from another by clearly defined horizontal borders. In the second register are lotus leaves followed by a register containing a row of animals. The main register shows a procession of gods among them Amun, Apedemak, Min, Anukis, Hathor, Anubis, Arensnuphis and Sebiumeker. The upper register is filled with lotus leaves.

Tomb BMC 53

This tomb had no superstructure preserved and it is located in the middle of area A in the factory plan (Mahmoud Suliman



Plate 3. Wooden coffin in BMC 44 and part of the blocking wall around it.



Plate 4. Deep copper-alloy beaker decorated with reliefs.

Bashir 2010, 69). The main reason to excavate this tomb was because the rain water of summer 2015 had caused a partial collapse of the chamber.

Work began by cleaning the resulting hole which was in the blockage area. At a depth of 840mm, six pottery jars were found in a line in front of the mud-brick blocking wall of the burial niche. Five pottery bowls were also discovered in front of the jars together with copper-alloy fittings and wood remains. These pots are probably extra offering for the deceased.

The mud-brick blockage was found at a depth of 940mm. A small part missing from the blockage possibly indicates plundering. However, on removing the blockage an intact burial was revealed containing a large number of grave goods consisting of rich and unique objects and two skeletons (Plate 5).

The burials were in the north-south oriented oval-shaped niche, which measured 3.3m north-south and 1m east-west. The first skeleton (A) was in the southern side of the chamber in an extended position on its back, the head to the south facing west. The left hand lay parallel to the body and the right one rested on the pelvis. The legs are extended but the tibia cross, the right over the left. The second body (B), on the northern side, was in semi-flexed position on its left side with the head to the south facing north west.

The grave goods recovered from this tomb consisted of two handmade black pottery jars decorated with incised lines



Plate 5. The rich burial in BMC 53.

and one small globular handmade black cup along with two wheel-made jars, one painted on the shoulder, a painted bowl and ledged rim bowls.

Blue beads of glass were found around both wrists and small copper-alloy beads of human form were found near the pelvis. There was also one large bowl of copper alloy and one of lead together with a disc of copper which may have been used as a cover.

Glass containers consisted of a light coloured long necked bottle, a tall green container with a handle and brownish glass cup all found near the head, and one small bottle found near the pelvis. Finally there were two ebony *kohl* pots, a *kohl* stick and two finger rings are found one of copper on the left hand and one of iron on the right hand.

Brief Notes on burial traditions

The excavations revealed that pyramids BMC 38 and BMC 43 were each associated with two tombs, with a typical east-west descender leading to an oval-shaped east-west burial chamber (Plate 6). One of these tombs BMC 38a has been dated to the early Meroitic period based on C¹⁴ analysis and datable material within it and on the basis of the burial tradition (Mahmoud Suliman Bashir and David 2015, 99). However, pyramid BMC 44 has only one tomb located beneath the middle of the pyramid structure and under the chapel and dated on the basis of the discovered material, to an earlier period.

In BMC 39 and BMC 43 the excavation revealed earlier tombs beneath the mud-brick structure and over the later tombs (Plate 7). The earlier tombs are most probably dating to the Napatan period based on the burial traditions observed and the recovered material.

General Remarks

The recent archaeological results from the Kushite cemetery at Berber provide valuable information and highlight the importance and significant location of this region. It occupies



Plate 6. Two tombs under pyramid superstructure BMC 43.

the area north of the Island of Meroe, and is south east of the major Kushite sites around Napata as well as those much further to the north. It lies at the point where there is the shortest route between the river and the Red Sea in the whole Nile Valley. This geographic position placed the region at a cross-road in the network of trade during the Early Islamic



Plate 7. Two tombs beneath pyramid BMC 39.

periods, and it can be suggested that the establishment of the region of Berber as a Kushite centre was because of its involvement and its role in trade. This can be paralleled by the Meroitic settlements north of the Third Cataract which gained considerable importance from their function as major control points over trade between Meroe and Egypt. Some Meroitic buildings in the north have been identified in the settlements at Faras, Meinarti and Karanog as official buildings most probably storehouses related to this trade (Edwards 2004, 159).

During the Kushite period trade was an important economic activity and, according to Adams, Meroe derived some of its importance from its geographical location at one end of the main overland trade route connecting the northern and the southern districts of Kush (Adams 1977, 303). In fact, the geographical location of Meroe at the upstream end of the Bayuda Desert road represents an important extension of this overland trade (Adams 1977, 303; Welsby 1996, 171). Also the existence of the Korosko Road to Egypt as a second overland trade route may reflect some level of Meroitic control over long distance trade. During the Early Islamic period there was intensive use of a route from Berber to Suakin as one of the important overland routes this fact may give indication of a possible existence of a trade route connecting the Middle Nile region with the Eastern Desert and the Red Sea in earlier periods. With more archaeological work the use of these routes may become evident.

The recent archaeological work in the Meroitic cemeteries at Berber and Dangeil revealed quite varied material that provided information on possible different sources of origin. Some may be associated with areas to the south such as objects made of ivory and ebony, as well as some pottery types including handmade pottery (Edwards 2014, 53). There is also metalwork, mainly vessels, jewellery, worked stone, glassware, faience and wine and oil containers, some of which most probably were imported items. Such material is considered to have arrived through trade and gift exchange during the Kushite period and in particular during Meroitic times.

To the east of Berber, is located the site at Tabot, whose geographic location and function as identified by artifacts confirm that it was a way-station for caravan routes. The site is a large settlement complex discovered in a survey project conducted in 1992 (Magid *et al.* 1995, 177). One of the survey objectives was to trace old caravan routes connecting the Nile with the east. Among these is the Berber route (Berber-Musmar-Sinkat-Suakin) (Magid *et al.* 1995, 166). Way stations were significant for trade and they are important archaeological remains to look for to confirm trade networks.

The statues discovered at Dangeil of the early Kushite kings Taharqo, Senkamanisken and probably Aspelta indicate an earlier existence of the site (Anderson and Ahmed 2009, 84). In addition, till now two Napatan graves have been discovered within the Meroitic cemetery at Berber. These results are of considerable interest and offer great research potential for better understanding the Kushite presence in

the region of Berber. The Napatan remains indicate that the region of Berber probably played an important role in the early Kushite period, and until a few years ago the Kushite presence was unknown so more sites may be discovered in the future. Therefore, now Berber and Dangeil are the only known Kushite complex along the road running from Meroe towards the Abu Hamad-Korosko Road.

These discoveries have provided evidence for a presence in the region since the early Kushite period. Therefore, it might be suggested that this discovery supports the argument that the region of Berber was an administration centre controlling state economic activities in the area. The advantages offered by the important geographical location of the region of Berber and its easy access to mainland routes adds to the significance of the site for state control. The presence of such royal symbols as the royal statues is evidence for direct control by the state over the region during the early Kushite time which continued into the late Kushite period.

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