



# Between Napata and Meroe: a newly discovered cemetery at Enapis (TARP) in the Middle Nile region

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After the withdrawal of the Egyptians from Nubia towards the end of the New Kingdom, a new power emerged in the area of the Nile bend, centred between the Fourth Cataract and ed-Debba. This area historically is known as Napata or the Napatan region. Gradually the Napatan kingdom inherited the territory previously controlled by the kings of Kerma and later by the New Kingdom pharaohs, and established the second Kingdom of Kush. This kingdom reached the peak of its power with the conquest of Egypt in the 8<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> century BC. Studies of mortuary practices is one field which has contributed to our better understanding of the Napatan tradition. Three royal cemeteries exist in the Napatan region and the same number in Meroe while the largest non-royal cemeteries of the Napatan period are located not far from the royal areas on the left bank of the river in Sanam Abu Dom, mid-way between el-Kurru and Nuri, and at Meroe in the West and South royal cemeteries. All of these cemeteries reveal some identical and some different architectural traits reflecting Napatan mortuary traditions.

The presence of Napatan period cemeteries at Meroe reveals the importance of the region during that period, and the recently discovered cemetery at Enapis could shed light on the area of Middle Nile region between Napata and Meroe.

## Location of the cemetery

The cemetery is located to the east of the asphalt road linking the towns of Atbara and Berber about 30km north of Atbara and 6km south of Berber. Work on the development of an agricultural project led to the discovery of a large cemetery consisting of tightly knit groups of tumuli extending north-south for about 1km in the plain along the eastern edge of Enapis village, from the recent Muslim cemetery in the south up to the agricultural fields in the north. This area, which is known locally as the Tinga Agricultural Project, lay on the right bank of the Nile nearly 500m to the east of the river.

Rescue excavations were conducted in July 2017 in this area by a team from the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums with a contribution from the tourism administration of River Nile State. The Tinga Archaeological Rescue Project (TARP) concentrated on the most endangered areas which are divided into three zones, the first one (60 x 60m), lying on the course of an irrigation channel, was fully excavated. The area was divided into 36 squares (10 x 10m) numbered west to east from A-G and south to north from

1-6, so that the south-western-square was A1. In this area 23 graves were discovered consisting of four main types: with pits of rectangular, circular, oval and of very narrow oval shape. The most common type is the rectangular (12 graves); there were nine circular graves and single examples of oval and narrow oval graves. The circular form is the earliest as it was cut by a rectangular grave and by a very narrow oval grave. The latter grave, measuring 1.12 x 0.31 x 0.25m, can be dated to the medieval period (D4-GR18). It contained the only extended skeleton discovered in this part of the cemetery and was oriented east-west with the head to the east, wrapped in textile (Plate 1).



*Plate 1. Grave D4-GR18 dating to the medieval period.*

The second and third excavated zones, located to the south of the irrigation channel (numbered from T1-T9), were affected partly by the movement of heavy trucks and in some places human bones were found on the surface. A total of nine graves were excavated, most of them rectangular (four graves), two were circular, one oval and one was narrow oval. One of them (T8-GR32) had an oval shaft ramp with its long axis east-west, and a side chamber on the west oriented east-west, containing a skeleton in a semi-flexed position dated to the Meroitic period (Plate 2).

Two graves were completely destroyed (in the first excavated area) due to the activity of heavy trucks; they were probably of rectangular shape as they contained wooden beds and grave goods, features found only in the rectangular graves excavated elsewhere on in the cemetery.

## Tomb descriptions

### *Superstructures*

The main type of superstructure was a circular mound of gravel covered in large pebbles (Plate 3) with a height of 50-500mm and diameters of 2.5-10m. In some cases these covered another superstructure consisting of either stone slabs surrounding the grave cut (T4-GR26), a circular structure (C3-GR7) of stone rubble (Plate 4), or a compact shallow mound (Plate 5) of alluvium (D6-GR3).

A circular mound of large pebbles abutted the circular or oval structure (D3-GR6-8) of stone rubble (Plate 6). The



Plate 2. Grave T8-GR32 of the Meroitic period.



Plate 5. Shallow mound of compact mud.



Plate 6. Circular mound of large pebbles revetting the circular or oval grave monument.



Plate 3. Circular mound of gravel covered in large pebbles.



Plate 4. Grave T4-GR26, the circular feature.

stone rubble structures were of varied height (100-300mm), thickness, diameter (1.3-3.2m) and shape.

#### *Substructures*

The surface of the cemetery consisted of a thin layer of fine gravel covering a thick layer (about 1m) of alluvium followed by a layer of stone and gravel over the bedrock. The majority of the graves were dug into the alluvium layer and only a few graves reached the bedrock. There were five main shapes of grave cut, rectangular, circular, oval, oval with side chamber (Meroitic) and narrow oval (medieval).

#### Rectangular graves

The most common orientation was east-west but a few were oriented north east-south west or south east-north west. All contained a wooden bed (Plate 7) except for grave F4-GR25 which was completely empty. The rectangular shape varied from wide to narrow, and also in depth and the shape of the corners and edges as follows:-

Rectangular pit with elliptical sides (Plate 8): for example wide grave A1-GR1 (1.66? x 1.4 x 0.93m) oriented east-west, with two holes for bed legs at the east and west sides. It was disturbed by the irrigation channel. The grave contained a skeleton in a flexed position oriented west-east, head to the west. A pottery bowl (Plate 9) was found in the north-east



Plate 7. Skeleton on a wooden bed in grave D3-GR6.



Plate 10. Pottery jar found in grave A1-GR1.



Plate 8. Rectangular pit with round edges.



Plate 11. Narrow grave (DC2-GR14) with four holes for wooden bed legs.



Plate 9. Pottery bowl found in grave A1-GR1.

corner and a pottery jar (Plate 10) in the disturbed western part of the grave. Narrow grave DC2-GR14 (Plate 11), oriented east-west (2.05 x 1.05 x 0.8m), contained four holes for wooden bed legs. The skeleton lay on its right side in a flexed position oriented west-east, head to the west, with the left hand extended in front of the pelvis. Another skeleton of an infant lay on the pelvis and a broken pilgrim flask was found north and south of the pelvis.

Rectangular pit with rounded corners (D5-GR11) was

oriented north west-south east (1.65 x 0.8 x 0.53m) and has four holes for the wooden bed legs (Plate 12). The skeleton lay on its right side in a flexed position oriented north west-south east, head to the west and with the left hand on top of the right, both in front of the face.

Rectangular pit with a trench in the east (F3-GR24) had two holes for bed legs to the west. The grave was oriented east-west (1.65 x 0.85 x 0.51m). Of the disturbed skeleton only a few remains were left.

Some of these rectangular graves are identical with Napatan graves in the Western and Southern cemeteries in Meroe, Dunham's types IIIA IIIB, IIIC and IIID (Dunham 1963, 213), and in the nearby cemetery at Berber (Mahmoud Suliman Bashir 2016, 60), a few kilometres to the north of Enapis.

#### Circular graves

There were two sub types discovered in the cemetery, with or without a step (like a pan grave) cut on the north edge



Plate 12. Rectangular pit with holes in the rounded corners to take the wooden bed legs (grave D5-GR11).

(D6-GR3 and C3-GR7 – Plate 13) or to the west (T3-GR22), with diameters between 800-960mm and a depth of 0.45-1m. One was filled with a compact layer of alluvium mixed with small gravel. Most contained skeletons oriented east-west in a crouched or semi-crouched position with variations in the location of the head; some of these graves were cut by rectangular graves (Plate 6). No grave goods were found, but sherds of pottery were recovered from the superstructure and the fill. In most of the graves ochre was noted. Graves D6-GR3 and C3-GR7 contained skeletons in a crouched position oriented east-west, head to the east facing west, with the hands in front of the face and the body wrapped in animal skin. Traces of red ochre were found in these graves.



Plate 13. Circular pit with a step cut on its north-east side (grave C3-GR7).

#### Oval graves

This type of grave was oriented either east-west or north east-south west. Two very similar graves were found (1.21 x 0.61 x 0.52-0.46m), the skeletons lying on their left sides facing north, either in a crouched (T2-GR21) or semi crouched (D4-GR13) position.

Circular and oval-shaped graves were found in the west and south cemeteries at Meroe (diameters 0.52-1.44m, depth

0.46-0.62m with bodies oriented east-west, mostly disturbed (Dunham 1963, 289-50).

A large number of rectangular graves (with rounded corners) was found also in the Sanam cemetery, along with shallow oval graves, some without associated material (Griffith 1923, 78, 80 and 89).

#### **Personal adornment**

Personal adornments appear in a few graves and consist of a cowrie shell found in the fill of grave T9-GR33, blue beads at the wrist and a copper-alloy ring (Plate 14) *in situ* on one toe in grave T1-GR20, and in grave C2-GR14 an iron implement (Plate 15) was found in a completely disturbed grave. The iron implement is identical in form to two objects of copper alloy found in the southern cemetery at Meroe, in grave Beg S.134 (Dunham 1963, 358 and fig. 189).



Plate 14. Copper-alloy ring.



Plate 15. Iron implement.

disturbed skeleton along with animal bones from a sub adult, possibly an ovicaprine, and a bovid.

#### **Enapis in its regional context**

A little further north some Napatan graves were discovered in the largely Meroitic cemetery at Berber. The nature of the material recovered from the excavations at Berber suggests the presence close by of a significant Kushite settlement in this region which lay between Napata and Meroe. Berber also may have been on one of the routes between the Nile and Red Sea coast, a route which was certainly important in the last few centuries, and thus have been an important entrepôt during the Meroitic period (Mahmoud Suliman Bashir 2016, 60-61). It is also highly likely that the region was important during the Napatan period as is evidenced by the cache of royal statues of several kings dated between Taharqo and Aspelta found at Dangeil in the later Meroitic temple. Royal statues similar to those found at Dangeil were discovered previously at the religious centre at Napata (Jebel Barkal) and at Dokki Gel (Kerma). Was the region also connected with the coronation road which was used during the Napatan



period? The presence of Napatan graves in Enapis provides further evidence for occupation in the environs of Berber during the earlier Kushite period.

A particularly significant find from the excavation in the Enapis cemetery is the presence of circular graves containing ochre and some pottery sherds identical to Kerma black-topped red wares (Plate 16) implying that it may at one time



Plate 16. Kerma pottery from grave C4-GR9-15.

have been within the Kerma cultural zone if not actually within the territorial limits of that kingdom.

### Summary of the physical anthropology study

The human remains excavated at Enapis represent 32 individuals. The skeletal preservation was generally good; most of the skeletons were largely complete with only a few elements missing but with some breakage or damage due to humidity (from Nile flooding and rainfall).

Individuals were analysed following the Standards for Data Collection by Buikstra and Ubelaker (1994). Age was determined using the pubic symphysis (Brooks and Suchey 1990) and auricular surface scoring systems (Lovejoy *et al.* 1985), as well as tooth wear (Walker *et al.* 1991) where appropriate. Sex was determined using pelvic and cranial morphology (see Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994); for stature we followed Trotter and Gleser (1952). Pathological changes were interpreted using Waldron (2009).

Preliminary results indicate a higher percentage of female (45.2%) than male (35.5 %) burials, with 19.4% non-adults. Based on a femur length of 400-490mm, the tallest adult was approximately 174cm (Grave A1-GR1) (Table 1).

Some of the adult skeletons could not be aged due to incomplete or poorly preserved pelvic bones. The infant skull close to the pelvis of grave C2-GR14 was also poorly preserved and an age at death was difficult to estimate. The remains of a child's leg were also found on the surface of the fill from grave D3-GR13.

Adult dentitions revealed the presence of ante mortem tooth loss (grave T4-GR27), as well as enamel hypoplasia, dental caries and calculus (grave T7-GR31) (Plate 17). New bone formation (bony lipping and large marginal osteophytes) were found on the lumbar vertebrae of the individual buried in grave T9-GR34 (Plate 18). *Cirbra orbitalia* was present in the orbits of the person in grave T3-GR22 (Plate 19). Trauma was identified in some individuals (e.g. grave A1-GR1; Plate



Plate 17. Heavy calculus (3) on the buccal Ums, Grave T7-GR31.



Plate 18. Osteophyte on the lumbar vertebrae in Grave T9-GR34.



Plate 19. Cribra orbitalia, on the child from Grave T3-GR22.

20). Additional research should allow us to contextualise these initial findings and gain greater insights into the lives of the people buried in this cemetery.

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Plate 20. Trauma on the proximal foot phalanges, Grave A1-GR1.

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Table 1. The distribution and variety of the graves including estimations for age at death and sex.

M = Mature      Y = Young      Rec = Rectangular shape      Cr = Circular shape

Grave no	Position	Orientation	Head at	Sex	Age at death	Type of grave
1	Flexed	E-W	W facing S	Male	M. adult	Rec
2	Contracted	NE-SW	N facing W	Male	M. adult	Cr
3	Crouched	E- W	E facing W	Male	Y. adult	Cr
4A	Flexed	E. W	E	Female	M. adult	Rec
5	Crouched	SE-NW	E facing W	Male	??	Cr
6	Flexed	E-W	W facing NE	Female	Y. adult	Rec
7	Crouched	NE-SW	E facing NW	Male	M. adult	Cr
8	Flexed	E-W	E	Female	M. adult	Cr
9	Flexed	E-W	W facing S	?	Childhood	Rec
10	Flexed	E-W	W facing S	Male	M. adult	Rec
11	Flexed	E-W	W facing SE	Female	Y. adult	Rec
12	Flexed	E-W	W	Female	Adult ?	Rec
13	Contracted	N-S	N facing E	Female	Y. adult	Oval
14	Flexed	E-W	W facing S	Male	M. adult	Rec
15	Crouched	E. W	W facing NE	Female	Y. adult	Cr
16/4B	Contracted	NE-SW	E facing N	Female	Y. adult	Cr
17	Flexed	E-W	W facing S	Female	M. adult	Rec
18	Extended	E-W	E facing NW	?	Infant	Oval
19	Flexed	E-W	W	Female	Adult?	Rec
20	Flexed	E-W	W facing E	Female	M. adult	Rec
21	Crouched	E-W	E facing W	Female	Adolescent	Oval
22	Crouched	E-W	E facing N	?	Childhood	Cr
23	Contracted	E-NW	E facing W	?	Childhood	Cr
24	Flexed	E-NW	NW	?	Childhood	Rec
25	Empty	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
26	Flexed	E-W	W facing S	Female	M. adult	Rec
27	Extended	E-W	E facing N	Female	M. adult	oval
28	Crouched	E-W	E. facing SW	?	Childhood	Cr
30	Crouched	SE-NW	E facing SW	Female	M. adult	Cr
31	Flexed	E-W	W facing SE	Male	M. adult	Rec
32	Contracted	E-W	W facing N	Male	M. adult	Oval + side chamber
33	Flexed	NW-SE	N	Male	M. adult	Rec
34	Flexed	E-W	W facing N	Male	M. adult	Rec