

The Northern Cemetery of Sanam at Et-Tameer, third excavation season (April-June 2018)

Murtada Bushara Mohamed

Introduction

In 1912-13 the Oxford Excavations in Nubia at Sanam, led by Francis Ll. Griffith, revealed the largest non-royal Kushite cemetery to be discovered in the Napata region, located to the south of the ancient town of Sanam. Nearly one century later another cemetery located to the north of Sanam at et-Tameer was discovered by chance and rescue excavations were conducted there by the Jebel Barkal Museum Archaeological Mission in 2004-5 and 2009-10. For the second campaign, in 2013-14, the excavation at et-Tameer was incorporated into the QSAP Dam-Debba Archaeological Survey Project (DDASP). As it is located within the project area, the site has been recorded as DS 100 et-Tameer (Mahmoud Bashir 2014, 161). After this season the site was separated from the DDASP and, by mistake, another site (Ambakol) was assigned the same record DS 100 (Fawzi 2015, 159). In order to eliminate this confusion the cemetery, as it is located to the north of Sanam, will be referred to as the northern cemetery of Sanam at et-Tameer.

Due to a lack of funds archaeological work at et-Tameer was suspended, only to be reactivated this year funded mainly by Mahmoud Suliman Bashir and partly by the author. Since the beginning of the work 22 tombs have been uncovered, all given the abbreviation TR. As some of these tombs share certain architectural features with those in royal and non-royal cemeteries in the Napata region, we hope that the excavations will contribute to a better understanding of the chronology of non-royal tombs in this region and elsewhere.

Tomb descriptions

During this season 18 tombs were uncovered with 12 being fully excavated. The excavations revealed various types of tombs including cave, shallow, and built; each type contains sub-types with a variety of furniture and a varied number of individuals.

Cave graves

Dug into the alluvium they consist of a rectangular shaft with or without a stairway from the east, leading to the burial chamber at the west end with between one and three rooms and, in some cases, with a subterranean chamber to the north and south.

TR2: the rectangular shaft, oriented east-west, was blocked with mud brick from top to bottom. It gave access to at least five chambers, three of them vaulted and rectangular, oriented

east-west, one after the other, and one chamber to the north and one to the south entered from the central chamber.¹ The excavation of this tomb has not yet been completed.

TR3: rectangular descendary 2.9 x 0.95m in size by 1.8m deep at its west end. It had eight steps, each 900 x 300 x 200mm in size, with the bottom step forming a 'U'-shape facing west and abutting the doorjamb and a square platform leading to the vaulted two-roomed chamber. A complete skeleton, placed in a painted coffin, was found in the east room; fragments of bone were found in the smaller west room.²

TR4: rectangular shaft 1.39 x 0.88m in size by 1.4m deep at its west end, containing six steps each 830 x 220 x 200mm, one step with a 'U'-shape facing west which led into two chambers in the west, and one chamber to the north, its doorway cut through the centre of the north wall of the first chamber (Plate 1). It was smaller in size and had a flat roof. An articulated skeleton in an extended position, oriented east-west and placed in a painted coffin, was found in the western chamber while the eastern chamber contained a disarticulated skeleton. A pottery beaker dated to the Napatan period came from the northern chamber.³



Plate 1. Tomb TR4: the descendary and the 'U'-shaped step.

TR11: rectangular shaft 1 x 0.7 x 0.95m with three steps 200 x 700 x 150-300mm and a landing in front of the doorway. The entrance, 800mm high and 500mm wide, leads to a single rectangular vaulted chamber hollowed out of the alluvium 1.3 x 1.5 x 0.8m, the roof of which has collapsed. The skeleton of a male had been placed in a plastered coffin painted blue, white, yellow and brown, laying on his back in an extended position. It was oriented north west-south east, head to north west facing east, arms extended with the hands resting on top of the pelvis. A pottery incense burner with a high stand was found to the south of the pelvis (Plate 2) and a pottery cup and sherds came from the fill.

¹ This tomb has previously been mentioned as DS 100/T2 (Mahmoud Bashir 2014, 161).

² This grave has previously been mentioned as DS 100/T3 (Mahmoud Bashir 2014, 161).

³ This tomb has previously been mentioned as DS 100/T4 (Mahmoud Bashir 2014, 161).



Plate 2. Cave grave TR11 with an extended skeleton in the single chamber.

TR13: small rectangular tomb (Plate 3) consisting of a rectangular shaft 1.2 x 0.5m with three steps leading to a small, single rectangular chamber 1.3 x 1.2 x 0.9m (roof collapsed). Only one complete pottery plate was found within it.



Plate 3. Cave grave TR 13.

TR16: unfortunately the descendary of this tomb lay below a water channel. Water penetration had caused damage to the steps and chamber. The rectangular descendary, 6.45m long by 1.29m wide at the top and 1.6m at the bottom, has a maximum depth of 6.9m at its west end. It contains 30 steps and is unique in having two 'U'-shaped steps (Plate 4). Step No. 25 abuts the doorjambs to the west, the last five steps



Plate 4. 'U'-shaped steps in the descendary of Tomb TR16.

laying within it. The penultimate step also was 'U'-shaped. The landing leads to three vaulted burial chambers, one to the east, one to the north and one to the south. The doorway, 1.78m high 1.35m wide and 700mm deep, was blocked by mud bricks 260 x 140 x 80mm in size, only the lower part of which survive. Two pillars, 1 x 0.56m in size, stood less than 1m to the west of chamber entrances. Both entrances were arched and lined with mud brick; the northern is 640mm wide and 600mm high, the southern is 780mm wide and 600mm high (Plate 5). Although the excavation of this tomb is not yet finished it has revealed a unique architectural feature not found in the Sanam cemetery excavated by Griffith. A massive fragment of pottery, along with a fragment of a pottery basin (Plate 6), a pottery stand, incomplete pottery bowls and incense burners were found in the east chamber fill, along with traces of a fragmentary painted coffin in the southern chamber.

Shallow tombs

These have a maximum depth of 200mm, most probably due to surface deflation and to the levelling of the area for agricultural purposes. With variations in shape and orientation, in general these are the poorest tombs discovered in the cemetery; in some cases they were empty. All the surviving skeletons were found in a flexed position.



Plate 5. Entrance to the subterranean chamber of Tomb TR16.



Plate 6. Fragments of a pottery basin from Tomb TR16.

TR6: rectangular, with rounded corners, oriented east-west, 2 x 1.1 x 0.2m, containing the incomplete skeleton of a child placed in a red and white painted wooden coffin. An upturned and broken pottery vessel was found in the western part, close to the feet.

TR7: oval, 1.2 x 0.6 x 0.2m oriented north east-south west, heavily disturbed. Only a few fragments of bone and pottery were recovered.

TR9: small trapezoidal, oriented east-west, 1m long by 500mm wide at the east, 200mm at the west and 200mm deep. Only fragments of pottery were found along with an upper grinding stone at the northern edge.

TR10: rectangular, oriented east-west, 1.5 x 0.78 x 0.2m, containing a skeleton placed in a red and white painted, plastered wooden coffin, in a flexed position oriented east-west, head to the west facing south laid on its left side, hands in front of the face (Plate 7).

TR12: narrow, oval, 1.55 x 0.4m, contained the skeleton of a male placed on his back oriented east-west, head to the east



Plate 7. Tomb TR10.

facing south, the hands are crossed over the chest, the lower part of the legs were missing (Plate 8).



Plate 8. Tomb TR12.

TR15: oval, 1.77 x 0.35 x 0.08m, an incomplete skeleton in an extended position was found, oriented east-west, feet to the west; the head was missing and ostrich eggshell beads were found in the fill.

Built graves

Two tombs were excavated, both contain more than one individual.

TR8: rectangular vaulted tomb, 3.4 x 2.4 x 0.96m, built of mud brick (Plate 9). Only two courses, set vertically, of the vault survived. It would appear most probable that this tomb was prepared and not used during the time period of construction but re-used later. There is no access to the tomb from outside, and actually the ground surface and the upper part of the entrance were at the same level – there is no access to the doorway from outside the tomb. The tomb was dug into the alluvium and lined with mud bricks surviving up to the present ground surface, with an arched entrance 900 x 900mm in the centre of the eastern wall below the ground surface, blocked with mud bricks. The roof had collapsed and covered the floor but nothing was found under the rubble (Plate 10). All the skeletons were found above the collapsed roof.



Plate 9. The rectangular tomb TR 14.



Plate 10. The collapsed roof of Tomb TR 8.

Skeleton 1, of a male, was found in the centre of the tomb 350mm below the surface. It lay in a flexed position, oriented east-west. The head is missing but from the orientation it was to the west.

Skeleton 2 is of a middle adult male, aligned north-south along the west wall in the rubble. It was in an extended position laying on the right side, head to the north, and hands on the pelvis.

Skeleton 3, a male, was found at a depth of 500mm from the surface and was aligned along the south wall in an extended position, on his left side, oriented east-west, and head to the east facing south.

TR14: rectangular tomb built of mud bricks 3.6 x 2.41m in size with a preserved height of 280mm. Oriented east-west it contained at least 59 individuals (Plate 11) – 16 sub adult and 43 adults among them 15 males, 16 females and 10 indeterminate; most of them lay on their back, or were



Plate 11. Skeletons in Tomb TR 14.

partially on their left or right sides, oriented east-west in an extended position, head to the west. The bodies had been placed one above the other, a few semi flexed. Some had been placed in painted coffins and had personal adornments of necklaces, anklets or amulets. Others had around the waist beads, scarabs and cowrie shells (Plate 12). A few skeletons



Plate 12. Personal adornments from Tomb TR 14.

were disarticulated or in a contracted position. Some seem to have been moved and replaced by others; one skeleton of a male was found in an extended position oriented north-south (Plate 13), head to the north facing south, in the north-west corner.

TR17: the excavation of this tomb has not been completed and the type is not determined as yet, but in general it is a multi-roomed tomb or complex of tombs cut by a large rectangular tomb, 10.9 x 6.5m, still to be investigated (Plate 14). Oriented east-west, the fill of this tomb is mainly sand. It contains at least 11 skeletons (Plate 15) in various orientations, some placed in painted coffins, along with more than 25 pottery vessels (Plate 16). Offering tables and personal adornments were found in the fill which suggest reuse of the tomb.

Offering tables and personal adornments were found in the fill which suggest reuse of the tomb.

TR17/1 was cut by TR17. Six steps lead to the burial chamber to the west (Plate 17), in which was an extended skeleton oriented east-west lying on its back partially on the steps. A pottery incense burner was found in the fill.

TR17/2 was cut by the south wall of TR17 (Plate 18). The shape of the tomb is uncertain. It contained a skeleton oriented east-west in an extended position along the southern wall of TR17, head to the west. Pottery jars, beads and a scarab were found at the waist.



Plate 13. The skeleton oriented north-south in Tomb TR 14.



Plate 16. Pottery from Tomb TR 17.

TR17/3 cut by TR17, the shape of the tomb is uncertain (Plate 19). Only the blockage of mud bricks and the chamber were found abutting the west wall of TR17.



Plate 14. Tomb TR 17.



Plate 17. The skeleton in TR 17/1.



Plate 15. Skeleton in TR 17.

TR17/4 was cut by TR17, its descendary seems to be more like that of TR16 and is located to the south of it (Plate 20). Most of the upper steps do not survive, but regular steps dug into alluvium, some containing mud bricks, were found. In the fill above and to the south of the steps offering tables,



Plate 18. Tomb TR 17/2.

various type of pottery and a fragment of a pottery basin were found. The most interesting find was a fragment of



Plate 19. Tomb TR 17/3.



Plate 20. Tomb TR 17/4.

pottery with an incomplete figure incised upon it (Plate 21) with part of an eye and right ear clearly visible.



Plate 21. Fragment of pottery with figure.

TR18: shallow rectangular shaft oriented north-south containing a skeleton laid on its right side, head to the south facing east, can be dated to the Islamic period.

Conclusion

Although the major part of this area of the cemetery has

been disturbed by agricultural activity and house construction, the surviving remains offered good examples of a variety of architectural traits and highlights the importance of the site. Previous archaeological work made known the importance of the northern cemetery of Sanam at et-Tameer. Its significance comes as a result of the discovery of a potential royal tomb entirely built from dressed sandstone masonry, comparable to Kashta's tomb Ku.8 and Piye's tomb Ku.17 at el-Kurru (Murtada Bushara 2014, 638). This poses the question of when this mode of construction was introduced to the region and if its first use was in a royal or non-royal context. Another feature of interest is the stairway: was it introduced first at the royal cemetery at el-Kurru by Piye? (Griffith 1923) – or earlier as it appears in both Sanam cemeteries associated with the cave graves. Pillars in the burial chambers are found in both royal and non-royal tombs with variations in the number of pillars in each chamber. It is a common feature during the Meroitic period for example at Bar. 5, 7 and 8 and Beg. N. 7, 8 and 9 (Dunham 1957) and also in Sedeinga Tomb 1V T1 (Rilly and Francigny 2013, 62).

Among the objects discovered are scarabs with hieroglyphic inscriptions, some with cartouches, an amulet with deities and a unique pottery sherd with a figure, the shape of which can be compared with a ceramic statue found in Building A1 at Kawa, of the god Bes and goddess Beset (Welsby 1998, 19).

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my great thanks to all my colleagues who participated in, and supported, this work, Dr Abdelrahman Ali (Director General, NCAM), Dr Salah Mohamed Ahmed, Dr Abdelhaleem the owner of the field, and the team of this season from NCAM, Mohamed Saad (physical anthropologist), Mahmoud Bashir (archaeologist), Elsamani Ezeldein (archaeologist), Hozifa Abdelmaged (archaeologist), Loai Shamsalola (assistant field director), Mohamed Elmoparak (archaeologist, collaborator), Ismaiel Elnoor (anthropologist – Birmingham University, UK) and Abdallah Ibrahim (Tourism office, Kareima).

Bibliography

- Dunham, D. 1957. *The Royal Cemeteries of Kush vol. IV, Royal Tombs at Meroe and Barkal*. Boston.
- Fawzi Hassan Bakhiet 2015. 'QSAP Dam-Debba Archaeological survey project (DDASP) preliminary results of the second season', *Sudan & Nubia* 19, 149-160.
- Griffith, F. Ll. 1923. 'Oxford Excavations in Nubia. The cemetery of Sanam', *Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* 10, 73-171.
- Mahmoud Suliman Bashir 2014. 'QSAP Dam-Debba Archaeological Survey Project (DDASP). Preliminary report on the NCAM mission's first season, 2013-2014', *Sudan & Nubia* 18, 156-164.
- Murtada Bushara Mohammed 2014. 'The Possible Royal Tomb of Et-Tameer Merowe', in J. R. Anderson and D. A. Welsby (eds), *The Fourth Cataract and Beyond. Proceedings of the 12th International Conference for Nubian Studies, London*. Leuven – Paris – Walpole, MA, 635-639.
- Rilly, C. and V. Francigny 2013 'Sedeinga 2013: A Season of Unexpected Discoveries', *Sudan & Nubia* 17, 61-65.
- Welsby, D. A. 1998 'Survey and excavation at Kawa, the 1997/8 season', *Sudan & Nubia* 2, 15-20.