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Front cover. Cattle and two goats\gazelle from Site GRD-14 in the Wadi Gorgod (photo Hamad Mohamed Hamdeen).

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Was the individual buried in MOG012.4 a Christian, a pagan, or both? Evidence for the appropriation of Christianity from a Late Antique-Early Medieval tumulus grave on Mogrart Island

Claudia Näser, Alexandros Tsakos and Jens Weschenfelder

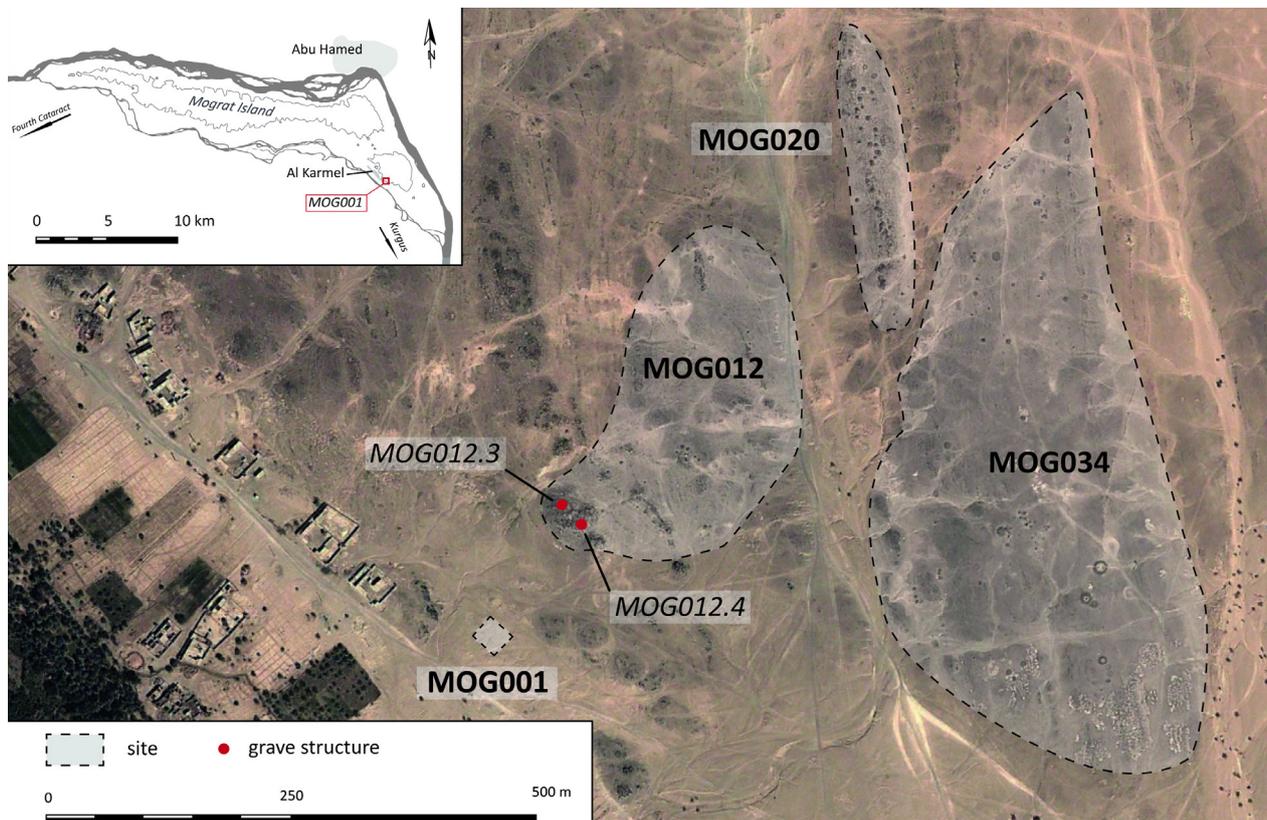


Figure 1. Mogrart Island with the location of MOG012 and MOG034 (mapping by Jens Weschenfelder).

In 2006, two of the three authors of this paper excavated two graves at Site MOG012 on Mogrart island, subsequently published as a Napatan burial ground (Näser 2006). A reexamination in the context of ongoing research at the nearby multi-period burial ground MOG034 (Weschenfelder and Rees 2014; J. Weschenfelder 2015a, 2015b) led to a reassessment of the findings from MOG012 – and to their redating.

MOG012 is situated at the edge of the plateau of the island's interior in the southeast of Mogrart (Figure 1). The site comprises c. 50 grave superstructures, mostly in the shape of small stone tumuli with diameters between 2 and 4m dispersed in small groups of up to eight features, covering an area of 315x285m. Two structures were chosen for trial excavations in 2006. One of them, MOG012.4 (Näser 2006, 17-18, figs 23-25), consisted of a mound of c. 0.8m height and 4m diameter (Figure 2). The excavation, starting with the dismantling of the superstructure, showed that the tumulus had been constructed of medium-sized stones placed around and on top of a setting of large stones (Figure 3) which in turn surrounded and covered a crevice in the rocky ground. The outermost layer of the tumulus was built of small stones and gravel.

The crevice contained the undisturbed burial of an adult individual in a flexed position with the head towards the south, facing west (Figures 4 and 5), covered by windblown sand. Preliminary analysis



Figure 2. Stone tumulus, MOG012.4 (photograph by Claudia Näser).



Figure 3. Stone setting, after the removal of the stone tumulus, MOG012.4 (photograph by Claudia Näser).

suggests that the deceased was a man in his forties or above.¹ Minute remains of woven material indicate that the body had been wrapped in a shroud (Figure 6). The grave goods consisted of two pottery bowls that had been placed, nested one inside the other, at the right hand of the deceased (Figures 4, 5, 7); the left hand rested in front of the pelvis. The smaller of these bowls is of Nile clay, wheelmade, with a light red slip on the inside, which is also burnished (Figures 7 and 9). The slip was also applied to the outside, in a sloppy way only covering the upper part of the vessel. Two grooves were incised beneath the rim on the outside. The larger bowl is handmade with a dark red slip (Figures 8 and 9). Its rim zone is unsmouldered, while the lower part of the body has been blackened. To achieve this pattern, the bowl had probably been placed inside another vessel during firing.

Fragments of a third vessel (Figures 8 and 10) were scattered around and underneath the tumulus, indicating that the vessel had been deposited, intact or broken in pieces, before the construction of the



Figure 4. Burial, MOG012.4 (drawing by Ralf Miltenberger and Alexandros Tsakos).



Figure 5. Burial, MOG012.4 (photograph by Claudia Näser).

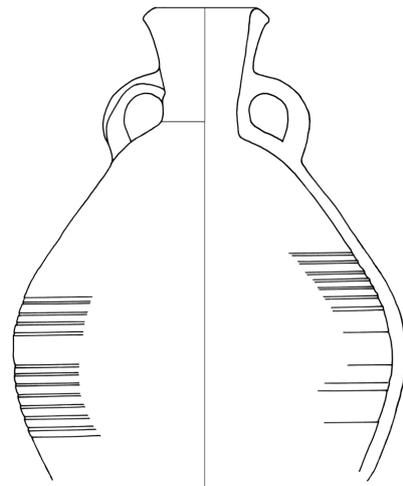
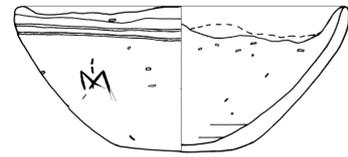
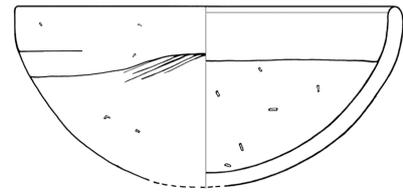
¹ The skeletal material is currently kept at Humboldt University Berlin and was not accessible for study.



Figure 6. Remains of woven material, MOG012.4 (photograph by Claudia Näser).



Figure 7. The two bowls placed at the hands of the deceased, MOG012.4 (photograph by Claudia Näser).



0 5 cm

Figure 8. Pottery from MOG012.4 (drawing by Ralf Miltenberger, Claudia Näser).

superstructure. These fragments formed the basis for the dating of the context to the (early) Napatan period in the first instance (Näser 2006, 105-106), as they belonged to a Marl A4 Variant 2 pilgrim flask with a ribbed surface and a pale cream slip, which is typical of this era. The specimen belongs to type F.i of Kilroe's classification (Kilroe 2019, 102-103, 227, 251-252, fig. 6.9, pl. 7). Numerous flasks of this type were found in the Sanam stores (Vincentelli 2018, 180, fig. 2.4, pl. 1.2). Following the evidence discussed below we can now conclude that the flask, along with some dispersed human bones in the immediate vicinity, belonged to an earlier burial which had been destroyed before or in the course of the construction of the stone tumulus MOG012.4. The earlier structure was probably a dome grave – further graves of this type are present in the northeastern part of MOG012. A similar pattern of reusing material from dome graves for the construction of later stone tumulus graves was documented in detail at MOG034 (see below and J. Weschenfelder in preparation).²

² The second grave investigated in 2006, MOG012.3 (Näser 2006, figs 26–28), also consisted of a stone tumulus, constructed above a packing of large stones that had been arranged around a rock formation at surface level. Three burials were associated with this structure. The skeletal remains of an infant and a child were undisturbed, but only isolated bones remained of a third adult individual. The only other finds were sherds of a rough handmade jar and a wide bowl, both unslipped, but with a wet-smoothed rim zone (Näser 2006, fig. 28). Both vessels were made of Nile clay that had been heavily tempered with (burnt-out) chaff. We thank Ulrike Nowotnick for confirming that the latter as well as the wet-smoothing around the rim are typical characteristics of Napatan pottery. This suggests that MOG012.3 comprises material from two phases of use, i.e. a Napatan one and, based on the morphology of the extant grave superstructure, a later one (for its dating see the discussion of MOG012.4).



Figure 9. Pottery bowls from MOG012.4 (photograph by Claudia Näser).



Figure 10. Pottery flask from MOG012.4 (photograph by Claudia Näser).

It was only during the recent reexamination of the evidence that an incision made after firing on the wheelmade bowl from MOG012.4 was identified as a Christian box monogram (Figures 8, 9, and 11). The main element of this monogram is an axe-shaped form with what is possibly a cross above. Two fainter lines are visible at the bottom right of the ‘axe’, but they seem to be secondary or accidentally incised during the marking process. Leaving aside the cross, this axe-shape has been interpreted as a monogram of the archangel Michael (e.g. P. Weschenfelder 2015, 140, figs 2n, o, with an example very similar to the present one; Tsakos forthcoming a, for a systematic presentation of this material) based on the way the lines forming the ‘axe’ can be interpreted as the letters forming the archangel’s name:

- The vertical lines and the upper half of the diagonal in the centre of the ‘axe’ can be read as an μ (Figure 12.a: red)
- The diagonal in the centre can be read as an χ (Figure 12.a: blue).
- The lower half of the diagonal can be read as a λ (Figure 12.a: yellow).
- The ι , iota, could be any of the two vertical lines, but the α and the η would be missing, unless the fainter lines extending the diagonal below the ‘axe’ were actually an attempt to render the α .

There are several examples from Nubia of the ‘complete’ monogram of Michael, with the α ‘hanging’ from the χ (Figure 12.b: green) and the η formed by a horizontal line in the middle of the ‘axe’ (Figure 12.b: orange) – the tattoo on the body of a woman buried at et-Tereif (Vandenbeusch and Antoine 2015) is probably the best-known. However, the combination $\mu\chi\lambda$ can also be understood as a monogram

of the archangel Michael, based on an abbreviated spelling omitting all vowels, i.e. $\mu\chi\lambda$, which is also attested in Nubia (e.g. Jakobielski 1991, e.g. 283: no. 31, 287: no. 175, 288: no. 195).

Conversely, the ‘axe’ could also be interpreted as a monogrammatic rendering of the numerical cryptogram of another archangel’s name, i.e. Raphael. Numerical cryptograms are formed by adding up the value of the letters of a given name according to the ancient Greek arithmetical system, where α is 1,

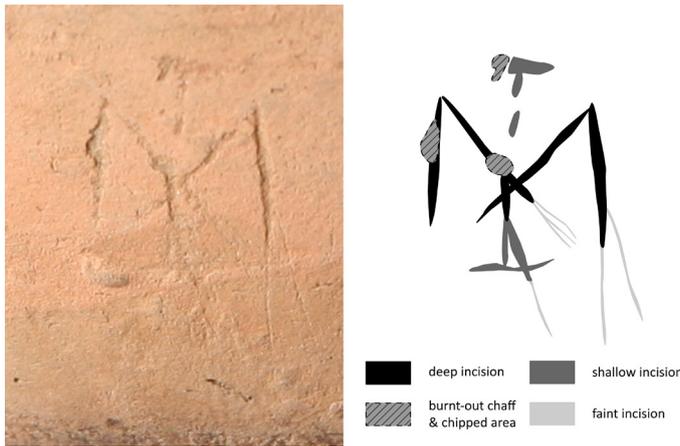


Figure 11. The monogram on the bowl from MOG012.4 (photograph by Claudia Näser; drawing by Jens Weschenfelder).

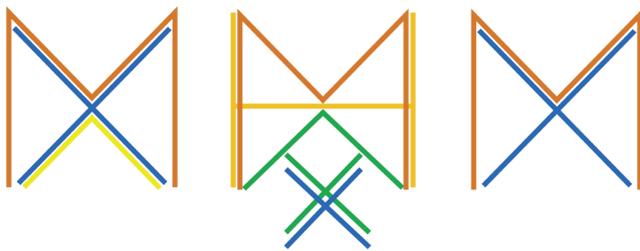


Figure 12. a. A schematic interpretation of the carving on the bowl from MOG012.4 as a monogram of the archangel Michael; b. A schematic presentation of a complete Michael monogram; c. A schematic interpretation of the carving on the bowl from MOG012.4 as a monogrammatic rendering of the cryptogram of the archangel Raphael (drawings by Alexandros Tsakos and Jens Weschenfelder).

among signs used on vessels or other objects and surfaces in pre-Christian times. Their existence might show that the first Christian communities invested an ancient sign with new meaning in the context of the new belief system.

In any case, the closed context renders this discovery interesting, not least since it demands, and enables, a re-dating of the assemblage and potentially of the other structures at MOG012, too. Bowls with a similar decoration of one or two straight grooves below the rim are typically associated with the Early Christian Period in Lower Nubia (Adams 1986, 219, 480-482: NIII). Specimens with this decoration and related shapes were found at Old Dongola (e.g. Bagińska 2008, 361, 367-368, fig. 5.b: 7th century AD; Danys-Lasek 2012, 323, fig. 5: M2B1: 6th-7th centuries AD; Danys 2016, 764, 767, fig. 2: M2B1, fig. 3: C1A2: end of the 6th-7th centuries AD). With an increasingly shallow profile, they represent a phase succeeding what Mahmoud el-Tayeb (2012, 93-94, fig. 33) discussed as Early Makuria Phase II. Overall, the currently available comparative evidence suggests a date in the mid-6th-mid-7th centuries AD for the bowl from MOG012.4. This chronological range is further substantiated by findings from the nearby multi-period burial ground MOG034 (see below with Figure 13).

In the case of the Mograt bowl, the archangelic monogram had been incised after firing and can

B is 2, *r* is 3, *l* is 10, *H* is 50, *p* is 100 and so on. The value of the name *ΡΑΦΑΗΛ* would thus be: $p=100, \alpha=1, \phi=500, \lambda=1, H=8, \lambda=30$, adding up to $100+1+500+1+8+30=640=600+40=x(=600)+H(=40)$ (Figure 12.c: blue and red respectively).

x and *H* are the two letters that form the main elements of the axe-shaped form we see on the Mograt bowl, as well as in representations from many other sites in Christian Nubia (e.g. Tsakos and Kleinitz 2018, 134). The way contemporaneous viewers understood the axe-shaped monogram is very difficult to ascertain given its various attestations. But there is no doubt that such monograms had more of an iconic value functioning as grapho-linguistic techniques, i.e. things written to be seen, rather than read (Goody 1987, 274; for Nubia, Łajtar and van der Vliet 2017, 251), and as invocations of the superhuman agents guaranteeing communication between mortals and the divine realm (Tsakos forthcoming a). In that sense, the 'axe' may have been 'seen' differently again and interpreted as a pair of wings symbolising angelic apparition and presence. Whether the 'axe' was first seen as an 'icon' of angelic figures or as constituted from its elements, i.e. the letters of the archangelic names, is a question that remains open. A path towards further investigating this question could lie in identifying the 'axe'

therefore be understood as an intentional addition by the vessel's owner and/or user who, however, is not necessarily identical with the deceased buried in MOG012.4. The reason for this addition can perhaps be elucidated by the bowl's functional properties and reconstructed use-life. The bowl shows heavy traces of use with massive uneven abrasions around the rim (Figures 8 and 9). They look like it had been used to scoop a solid substance or scrape something from a container or a surface, in the process abrading the majority of the rim. The scale of the wear indicates that the bowl was intensely used before it was selected as a grave good. Perhaps mirroring its previous function, it was again deposited as the inner piece of a nested assemblage, with the intact section of the rim close to the hands of the deceased, ready to be grasped, while the abraded portions dip into the handmade bowl which is slightly larger and thus easily accommodates the bowl with the monogram. But what does this arrangement signify?

It is impossible to determine the *raison d'être* of either this arrangement or the carving of the monogram on the bowl, but there are some comparisons for the latter that can assist our interpretation. First and foremost, eating and drinking vessels are frequently marked with the name of the archangel Michael in its various attestations, i.e. complete or abbreviated name, monogram or cryptogram. This has been interpreted as an indication of the users' wish to have these vessels protected by the archangel's powers against evil or disease entering their body through the consumption of food (for a first reference to this topic, see Tsakos forthcoming b). Additionally, the archangel Raphael is considered, among other things, a guarantor of health in medieval Nubia (Żurawski 2012, 363-383). In view of this, the bowl might even have been part of a context in which medicine was produced or consumed. Conversely, given the role of the archangel Michael in acts of magic and ritual power, it is possible that incising the monogram was actually (part of) such an act. Either way, we can safely assume that the bowl comes from a context in which Christian ritual practices were deliberately exercised, based on a belief in the efficacy of the invocation of angelic powers. These observations tell us that we are looking at an era in which the Christian faith had reached daily life and the material culture associated with it.

With MOG012.4, we literally have evidence 'at hand' for the entanglement of pagan and Christian traditions in a period that defies being labelled in overly broad historical categories (Edwards 2001): the deceased was buried in a flexed position, wrapped in a shroud in a near-surface crevice on a rocky crest above the floodplain. As location for the burial, his community chose a time-honoured mortuary landscape (J. Weschenfelder 2015a; 2015b). Following the examples surrounding them, they built a stone tumulus to mark the grave. For grave goods, they deposited two pottery bowls with the body. One of them shows the mark of a new era – the incised archangelic monogram. However, the bowl was embedded in a burial assemblage that we would have labelled 'pagan', save for this one piece of evidence. This suggests that the community who frequented MOG012 probably hedged their bets on both sides. They accommodated Christian symbols in their daily life, likely for protection (cf. Vandenbeusch and Antoine 2015). And they were happy to transfer them into the mortuary sphere. But otherwise they adhered to, and relied on, pagan traditions and practices: the flexed body position, the near-surface crevice burial, the stone mound as a grave marker and, above all, the integration of the dead in a mortuary landscape that clearly signaled earlier ways of living and dying – however they were seen at that point.

With this, MOG012.4 is 'culturally earlier' than the burial of a woman, C¹⁴ dated to c. AD 655-775, from et-Tereif in the 4th Cataract, some 120km downriver from Mogrart (Vandenbeusch and Antoine 2015). Featuring a tattooed Michael monogram on her right thigh, this woman was interred in an extended dorsal position in a rectangular grave pit covered with stone slabs in a cemetery close to the floodplain, which comprised tumuli as well as box graves (Carpio and Guillen 2005; Vandenbeusch and Antoine 2015). Though (micro)regional variation rather than chronological sequence may be at play here, findings from MOG034, a multi-period burial site on the rocky ridge directly east of MOG012 (Figure

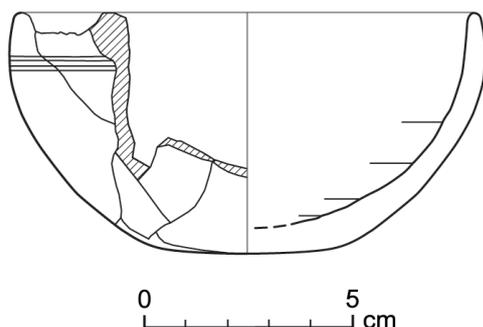


Figure 13. A bowl reconstructed from fragments found in the lower part of the superstructure and the robber's cut of Grave F085 in MOG034 (drawing by Jens Weschenfelder).

deceased were mostly placed in a flexed position on the right-hand side with the head to the north or northwest. The bodies were wrapped in or covered by a leather or textile shroud. Grave F085 in the northern part of MOG034 was slightly disturbed, but still contained the remains of a small child, adorned with two delicate iron anklets. In the lower part of the superstructure and the robber's cut, fragments of a red-slipped bowl with two incised grooves, which resembles the specimen from MOG012.4, though it still has a slightly deeper and less open shape, were found (Figure 13). Three radiocarbon dates of leather remains and woven fabrics from Graves F029, F063 and F083 span a period from c. AD 550-655; a fourth grave, F033, was slightly earlier (J. Weschenfelder in preparation). Further graves of this type are present at MOG020, a burial ground on an elongated ridge northeast of MOG012 (Figure 1). Following a different concept in the use of space, a later medieval cemetery, MOG001, is situated in the lowland 130m southwest of MOG012 (Figure 1). It features graves with mastaba superstructures built of mudbrick, some with a red brick lining and a coating of white plaster (Näser 2006, 109-111, figs 30-36). The history of this cemetery has not yet been ascertained, but a fragmentary pottery grave stela (Tsakos 2010, 686, fig. 3a) and the morphology of the superstructures indicate that the graves recorded so far at least date from the Classic Christian period (for comparisons see Adams 1998, 21, figs 2-3, 8). By its location, the grave architecture and the layout of the burials, this cemetery clearly represents a 'culturally later' phase in medieval burial practices.

In summary, the evidence from MOG012.4 suggests that the Christian faith and accompanying practices had arrived in some spheres of life on Mograt island by the 6th-7th centuries AD. But contrary to Adams' (1998, 36) observations from Lower Nubia, there was no 'immediate and marked change from earlier traditions' with regard to burial practices and grave architecture. This was only effected later – if we follow the evidence from et-Tereif, in the 7th-8th centuries AD. Obviously, this reconstruction is only a snapshot, confined to the region of the 4th Cataract and Mograt, or perhaps even narrower, to just the communities burying their dead in the mortuary landscape of MOG012, MOG020 and MOG034.³ But based on the evidence discussed above we can suggest a scenario perhaps most effectively understood through the concept of appropriation, i.e. 'the way in which the intended receivers – or even the not intended receivers – make things, ideas, symbols their own through their transformation and their adaptation to

1), indicate otherwise. MOG034 features 20 graves of the type under discussion here, i.e. a small, but high stone tumulus with a slightly convex shape (J. Weschenfelder in preparation). Eight of these graves, all located in small groups in the centre and northern part of the ridge, were excavated. They all displayed a similar mode of construction. On the surface, large stone slabs covered the shallow grave pit above the ancient surface. Large and medium-sized stones were piled on top. A final layer of small stones and gravel was used to produce the even outer shape of the tumulus. Spaces in-between the stones were filled with loose sand, presumably a result of aeolian processes. In the shallow subcircular grave pits, the

³ For another local scenario see the discussion of the Late Antique–Early Medieval cemeteries of Jebel Ghaddar North by Bogdan Żurawski and Mahmoud El-Tayeb (1994). Note that the authors suggest the same date range, namely the second half of the 6th-7th centuries AD, for the last tumuli at the site. Note that one excavated example produced a burial 'in a contracted position [...] wrapped in a linen shroud, but otherwise not accompanied by any grave goods' (Żurawski and Mahmoud El-Tayeb 1994, 299).

the receivers' standards, whatever these may be' (Frijhoff 1998, 104). The people who buried the deceased in MG012.4 included an object testifying to the belief in the power of the archangels in what we would otherwise identify as pagan mortuary practices. From this perspective, we could label the individual from MOG012.4 both a pagan and a Christian. The evidence indicates that these dimensions were not mutually exclusive and that members of the communities frequenting MOG012, MOG020 and MOG034 attributed meaning to objects and practices taken from both belief systems, merging them at least in the mortuary sphere.

We do not (yet) know how Christianity as a 'cultural impulse' (Frijhoff 1998, 104) reached Mograt and how local communities came to appropriate it in the way evidenced in MOG012.4. In order to learn more about these aspects, it will be necessary to further scrutinise patterns of material culture distribution in future research. Filling in the evidence from other sites may confirm that Christianity reached Mograt from the north, and not from the south, as seems to have been the case at Akad, where vessels decorated with Christian symbols and part of the Soba Ware tradition were found in an otherwise pre-Christian post-Meroitic burial context (for the discovery, see Mohamed Faroug and Tsakos 2005; for the interpretation as evidence for a late Christianisation of the region coming from the south, see Tsakos in preparation).⁴ For the time being, what has become clear is that studying the stone tumulus graves that dot the rocky ridges above the floodplain on the banks of the Nile between the 4th and the 6th Cataracts can help us learn more about religious change and strategies of cultural appropriation from the Late Antique to the Medieval period in the region.

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⁴ A movement of Christianity into the upstream regions of Nubia from the south is also suggested by the presence of Christian Axumites at Soba when Byzantine missionaries arrived (Vantini 1975, 19-21).

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