

# SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



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*Front cover:* Excavations in progress in the *Kerma Ancien* cemetery at site H29 in the Northern Dongola Reach (photo D. A. Welsby).

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# Reports

## Qalaat Shanan: a large Neolithic site in Shendi town

*Ahmed Hamid Nassr Hamd*

### Introduction

Many Neolithic sites have been discovered in the Shendi Reach. The most important among these are el-Kadada, el-Ghaba (Geus 1984) and es-Sour (Sadig 2005). Other sites, e.g. Sidier, Shaqalu, Ushara and Qandtu, have also been investigated (Geus 1981, 39) (Figure 1).

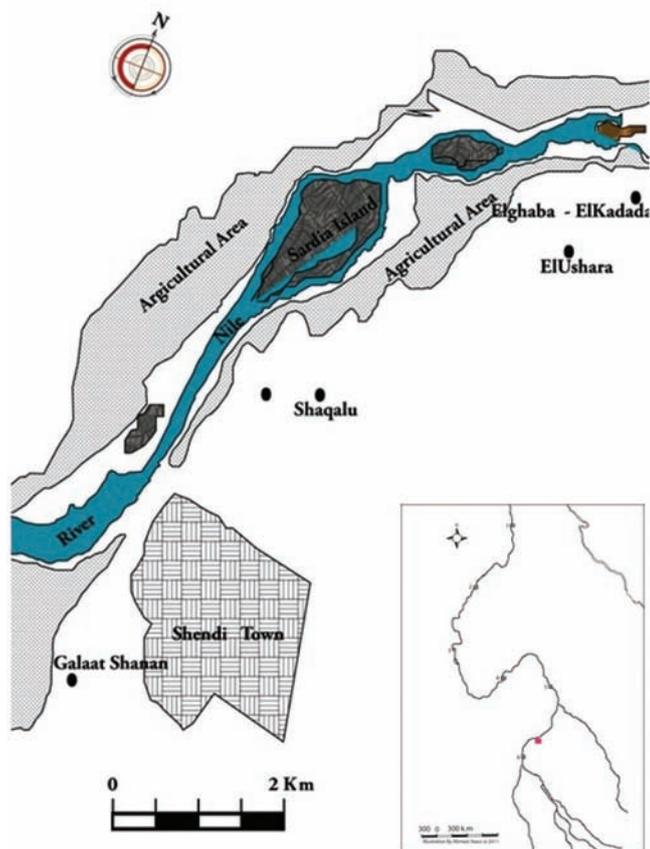


Figure 1. Neolithic Sites in the Shendi area.

In the late 1990s, a new site, namely Qalaat Shanan was discovered in Shendi town. Since its discovery, Qalaat Shanan has provided evidence for the importance of this part of Shendi as a link between the different Neolithic sites in Khartoum, the Butana and further north in the Atbara region. This report will give a brief description of the site and highlight its importance to Neolithic studies as a whole.

### Description of the site

The site of Qalaat Shanan is located about 1.5km west of Shendi and about 7km south of el-Kadada (Figure 1). Today

the site consists of high mounds rising from the surrounding area. These mounds are densely covered with lithics, pottery and bones, a large scatter being spread over an area measuring approximately 400m east-west and 800m north-south. The site is divided into three mounds, (A), (B) and (C). Mounds (A) and (B) extended 600m from north to south and are separated by Khor Umm Gegama which flows from east to west.

Mound (A) represented the northern part of the site, rises about 378m above sea level and about 5m from the surrounding area, while Mound (B) lies in the middle of the site, and rises about 375m above sea level and 3m above the surrounding area. Lastly Mound (C) lies in the south-eastern part of the site and extends about 600 x 300m from north to south (Plate 1).



Plate 1. General view of Mounds (A) and (B).

The potential of Qalaat Shanan to provide significant evidence for our understanding of the Neolithic culture in the Shendi area was clear; the site is mostly covered with Neolithic sherds and stone tools as well as animal bones and shells, although recent human activities have affected most of the site's surface.

### Excavation on the site

The Qalaat Shanan site was first mentioned by Vercoutter in 1962 and referred to as "Shendi Neolithic site" (Vercoutter 1962; see also Geus 1984; Edwards 1989; Baud 2008; Al Sadig. 2003-4, 17). The first excavation was undertaken by Alsadig in 2000. Six test seasons have taken place as part of student training at the University of Shendi.

The first season focused on Mound (B) where Islamic graves on the upper layers and two Neolithic graves were discovered. The next five seasons focused on Mound (C), which consists mainly of Neolithic settlement debris. The author directed the last three seasons in Mound (C) starting in 2010 and one test pit in Mound (B) in late 2011.

The whole ten seasons investigated 300m<sup>2</sup> of the western part of Mound (C), as well as random tests in the central part while only one season's work has been done on Mound

(B). In the last season (2011) two test pits were dug, one in Mound (B) and other in Mound (A).

The results of these seasons prove that Qalaat Shanan is a large Neolithic site and may present good evidence for Neolithic development in this part of the Middle Nile.

#### *Details of the excavated layers*

The three mounds on the site consist of different types of material extending from the Mesolithic to Neolithic periods and some elements of Islamic period, which prove the continuous usage of the site in the later prehistoric period as a settlement and cemetery. The Neolithic layers consist of material that can be compared with that from many nearby Neolithic sites especially Shaqadud (Marks and Mohammed Ali 1985) el-Ghaba (Geus 1984), el-Kadada (Reinold 2008) and es-Sour (Sadig 2010).

In this section we will provide a detailed description of contexts on the site drawn from the work of three seasons on mound (C).

Most of squares excavated were covered with pottery sherds and lithics scattered from the surface up to a depth of 300mm. This layer also contained remains of a dwelling from the Islamic period built with mud bricks and mortar. The size of the bricks is 340 x 170 x 170mm (Plate 2).



Plate 2. Upper layers of the mud-brick foundation.

The remains consist also of wooden posts and post-holes forming a hut or small room, the walls preserved about 250mm above ground level. Other material recovered consisted of large black jars, ash and a small bowl, which indicated an earlier Islamic occupation on the site.

A soft grey soil which contained pottery sherds decorated with dotted and some geometric incised lines, red and brown sherds, quartz flakes, an upper grinding stone, a polished stone ring, as well as charcoal and ash were found in many places at a depth of between 300-900mm from the surface. This section also consists of black soil mixed with pottery sherds decorated with straight lines and rocker stamps, shells and beads as well as animal bones and graves.

The lower levels which extend between 0.9m and 1.3m below the surface consist of dark clay mixed with wind-blown sand. Pottery sherds decorated with complex dots and lines,

shells and lithics especially burins, crescent, unworked flakes, and lower and upper grinding stones were discovered in this section with sherds also noted at a lower level. In the lower part of this section between 1.1-1.3m, a hard soil mixed with white gravel and small quartz tools of typical Early Khartoum microlithic form were noted. Fragments of bones, stone tools, a stone ring and wavy line and dotted wavy line sherds were discovered in a lower level grave at a depth of 1.3m.

The test pit in Mound (B) revealed a grave 540mm in depth with offerings of a pottery sherd, beads and polished axes. Another in Mound (A) was an Islamic grave 600mm deep with some brown pottery fragments in the upper layers of the mound.

The archaeological context of Qalaat Shanan extended from Mesolithic/Early Khartoum tradition to the late Neolithic. Material from these periods was discovered throughout the excavated levels. This makes the site one of the most important Neolithic sites in the region and it can be compared with many Mesolithic/Early Khartoum and Neolithic sites in the region especially the sites of Shaqadud (Marks and Mohammed Ali 1985; Ambrose 1979; Mohammed Ali 1982; Fattovich *et al.* 1984), the Atbara-Damer sites (Haaland and Anwar 1995; Halaand 1981), el-Ghaba and el-Kadada (Geus 1984), and esh-Shaheinab (Arnell 1953).

## Description of archaeological materials

### *Pottery*

The Qalaat Shanan ceramic assemblage contained five vessel forms which are summarised as follows:

1. Small bowls mostly found in the middle levels and consisting of black and brown bowls with rocker-stamp decoration.
2. Open mouth bowls in different colours (red, brown and black).
- 3 and 4. Cups and basins located in the middle levels and consisting of a few brown coloured examples decorated with geometric lines and fingernail elements and wiped in a manner found in el-Kadada (Geus 1984, 38).
5. Jars: in the absence of complete large pots we must draw what conclusions we can from a study of the many sherds found in the lower levels. Some of these may have been from large jars.

Regarding the fabrics, the samples from the site can be divided into four categories;

- hard coarse ware
- fine coarse ware
- friable coarse ware
- hard coarse ware with a wiped surface

Some of these elements could be compared to material from Shaqadud (Mohammed Ali 1991, 73).

The decoration of the samples discovered on the site consists of different patterns such as incisions (comb and wavy line “arch shape and classic wavy line decoration”, some



styles of single line) and rocker stamps (straight, curved, and dotted zigzags) (Figure 2). In some cases they have been decorated by alternate pivoting stamps with pairs of continuous dots and simple impressions along with a variety of other elements (Figure 2).

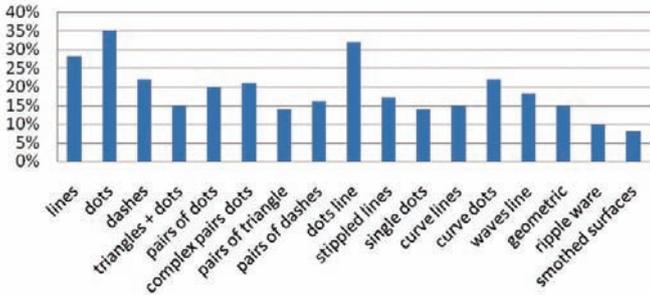


Figure 2. Decoration elements of Neolithic pottery on the Qalaat Shanan site.

Some of these samples could be compared to others from Shaqadud, el-Kadada and es-Sour (Caneva and Marks 1990; Mohammed Ali 1991; Geus 1984; Sadig 2010).

#### Lithic Material

The excavations recovered a variety of lithic material and the preliminary results are encouraging. The tools in the assemblage ranged in age from the Early Khartoum to the Late Neolithic. Although the number of samples discussed here is small, the material from the site seems to indicate exploitation of two main raw materials; quartz and sandstone. A few pieces were made of agate and of Nile pebble. Most of the samples were recovered from middle and upper levels while the occasional find came from the lower level. The samples consist mainly of scrapers, flakes, crescents, retouched notches, backed blades and polished axes (Plate 3). Some rough and polished stone rings (Plate 4) were also noted. Fragments of grinders were found all over the site.



Plate 3. Lithics from the Qalaat Shanan site.



Plate 4. Stone Ring.

#### Faunal Remains

These consist mainly of variety of animal bones, *Limocoloria* and *pivalva* shells. Beads made of ostrich eggshells have been noted. More information about the types of animal bones will be presented in later reports.

#### Graves

Five graves were discovered at Qalaat Shanan, three located in mound (B) of which two were excavated by Alsadig (2003-4, 17).

One of the two graves lacked any grave goods (see Alsadig 2003-4, 18) while the other contained a skeleton at a depth of 600mm laid in a contracted position and furnished with beads and a stone bracelet. According to the position of the skeleton and the grave goods, this grave could be compared with examples from Kadero (Amerlagos and David 1978, 411-412) (Plate 5).



Plate 5. Burial with offerings (after Alsadig 2003-4).

The third grave in Mound (B) discovered in 2011 by the author in a test pit was 540mm deep and contained a skeleton in the same position but differed in its furniture. Here there were white beads made from ostrich eggshell at the neck and legs of the skeleton, a pottery sherd and polished axes scattered around the skeleton.

The fourth grave was discovered in the 2010 season in Mound (C). The skeleton was found at a depth of 1.3m below the surface. The skeleton lies in a contracted position, head to the east looking south. Grave goods consisted of a polished stone ring found close to the right leg and fragments of wavy line sherds around the skeleton. The grave and the material could be compared with other Mesolithic graves in the region, at Aneibes and ed-Damer (Haaland 1981).

The fifth grave discovered in the 2011 season had a depth of 950mm. The skeleton lies in a contracted position with the head to the west facing north. The head of the skeleton rests on the left arm, and the legs were bent close to his chin (see Figure 3).

In the latest test excavation on Mound (B) three infants burials have been discovered, two contained in large pots, and the third with grave goods of a pottery vessel and beads.

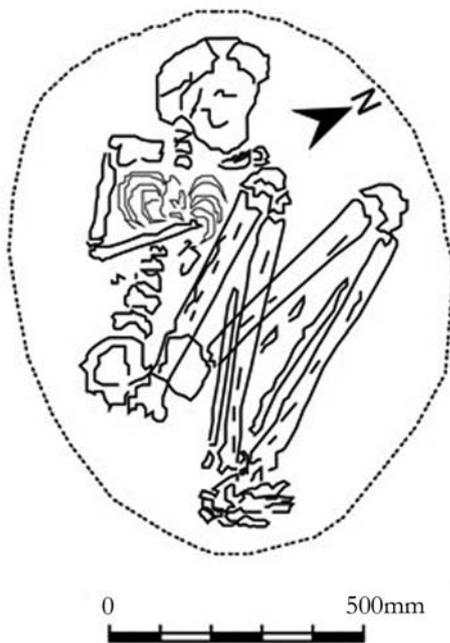


Figure 3. Skeleton position in Qalaat Shanan (scale 1:15).

## Conclusion

If we compare our results from Qalaat Shanan with those already quoted above and concerning the same period but in other regions of Sudan, we arrive at the following conclusions:

A significant similarity was noted between Qalaat Shanan and the other Neolithic sites in Central Sudan in terms of pottery, lithics and the graves. Most of these elements could be dated to the early Neolithic rather than late Neolithic although the occasional presence of polished axes and polished stone rings could be compared with data from el-Kadada and es-Sour.

The excavations proved that other activities took place on the site during the Islamic period and that the site was used for a long time as a settlement and cemetery. In this context, the results of the present study on graves of Qalaat Shanan

converge with those found in the Mesolithic sites of the Atbara and Khartoum regions, but with some differences with regard to quality and quantity of grave goods. Moreover, the presence of graves during the Mesolithic and early Neolithic periods indicate that the site was extensively inhabited as early as the Mesolithic period up to the late Neolithic and from the Early Islamic period up to the present day (Arkell 1949, 76; Caneva 1993, 82).

The faunal materials investigated so far indicate wetter condition during the middle Holocene. The same situation has been observed in contemporary sites nearby (Arkell 1953, 52; Haaland 1981, 46; Marks and Mohammed Ali 1985, 264; Sadig 2010, 123).

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