

# SUDAN & NUBIA

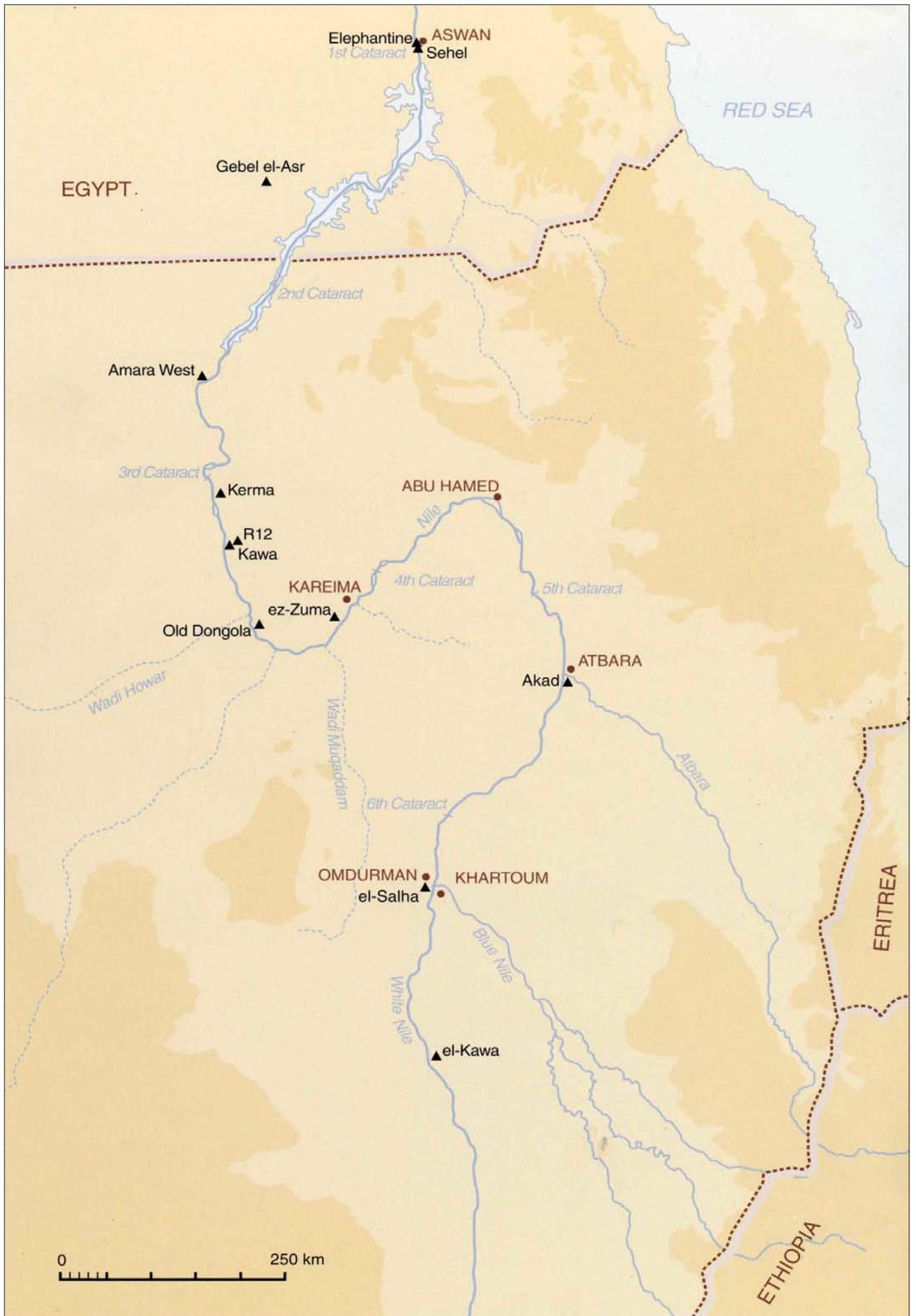
The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



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*Front Cover:* An apostle from the mural in the chapel at Baganarti containing the king's portrait.

## Introduction

*Vivian Davies*

At the time of writing (mid-September 2002), the 10<sup>th</sup> International Conference for Nubian Studies has just finished, generously hosted by colleagues in the Università di Roma "La Sapienza". The large number of papers delivered shows how rapidly the subject of Middle Nile studies is growing, with significant advances in knowledge achieved since the last conference held in Boston four years ago, an encouraging state of affairs, to which the content of this present volume bears further witness. There was, however, one hugely important issue which overshadowed the event: the looming crisis of the new dam at the Fourth Cataract.

As reported by the Sudanese delegation, preparatory work for the dam has now begun and actual building will start in two years. It is expected to take a further seven years to complete. In an unwelcome echo of the Aswan High Dam scheme, the reservoir created will flood over 170km of the Nile Valley between the Fourth Cataract and Abu Hamed, enveloping, as we now know from preliminary surveys, thousands of archaeological sites - artefact scatters, settlements, cemeteries and rock-drawings dating from the Palaeolithic to the Islamic Periods. Very little is known about these sites; for the most part only that they exist. Our Sudanese colleagues are urgently appealing for assistance, so that as much as possible of the record may be investigated and documented before the area is lost to knowledge for ever. In response, SARS is this winter launching a campaign of rescue excavation in a region which we recently surveyed (see *Sudan & Nubia* 4 [2000], 51-7), but an extensive international effort will be required if any serious impact is to be made. Our next international colloquium, to be held at the British Museum on 8 May 2003, will focus on the dam emergency. All colleagues with an interest in helping are invited to attend.



# Reports

## The Second Excavation Season at R12, a Late Neolithic Cemetery in the Northern Dongola Reach

*Sandro Salvatori and Donatella Usai*

The second excavation season within the Late Neolithic cemetery, Site R12, was carried out over a period of four weeks between December 2001 and January 2002. The project is being undertaken on behalf of SARS and the *Ce.Ve.S.C.O.*<sup>1</sup> The site, which lies not far from Kawa, was discovered by the SARS systematic survey of the Northern Dongola Reach (Welsby 2001, 146) and is located on a natural hillock covering about 1400m<sup>2</sup>.

The cemetery covers an area of about 800m<sup>2</sup>, of which 268m<sup>2</sup> has been investigated. The area explored in the 2001-2 field season amounted to a 128m<sup>2</sup> trench, which expanded that dug in the first season to the south and south-west, on the upper part of the cemetery mound (Figure 1).

As described in previous reports (Salvatori and Usai 2001a; 2001b), the upper part of the mound is characterised by a residual Nile silt layer sat on a sand deposit of unknown depth. The residual silt deposit is 2m thick at the centre of the mound and decreases progressively down its slopes. The present shape of the mound is most probably due to strong erosion processes as is indicated by the decreasing depth of the grave pits from the centre to the periphery of the mound. In the northern and eastern sections of the excavation trenches the bodies, and the related artefacts, were lying almost on the surface, without any or with only scant traces of the original pits; in the southern section the conservation of the silt layer allowed us to recognise the original grave pits. Here, extensive later pitting activity was detected, with most of the pits filled with medium-sized gravel, which had disturbed the graves. It has been impossible to understand why these pits were dug. A large fragment from a wheel-made pottery vessel, possibly of medieval date, was found inside one of them.

During this season 33 graves were excavated containing a total of 44 individuals: 12 males, seven females, 13 unsexed adults, seven children and four infants<sup>2</sup>. With the data avail-

able we can calculate a density of 0.32 graves per m<sup>2</sup> and thus an expected population of about 260-300 graves on the supposed surface of the approximately 800m<sup>2</sup> mound.

The new data confirm the general trends observed during the previous season concerning the position and orientation of the dead. The majority of the bodies were laid crouched on their left side (70.15%), oriented west-east (43.94%) with the face to the north or north-east (80.09%), while a limited number of right side depositions (22.39%) with the face to the south were also recorded. The prevailing body orientation (the skull/spinal column axis) is west-east and north west-south east (63.20%).

The main grave type was the single deposition pit. Some exceptions were recorded: Grave 7 (an adult female buried with a new-born) found in the previous season, Grave 48 (Colour plate I) where two adult males were buried together, and possibly the much disturbed Grave 56. In the previously recorded occurrence of the re-digging of an earlier pit grave, attention had been paid so as not to disturb the primary burial (Salvatori and Usai 2001a). A similar situation was noted in at least two cases this season - i.e., Graves 38 (Figure 2) and 46 (Figure 3). Grave 46 is worth mentioning because during the re-digging of the pit the head of the former individual was moved and reburied some 10cm above its original setting before the insertion of the second body.

In two cases pits dug for new burials cut into older graves. In fact, in the fill of Graves 33 (Colour plate II) and 48 remains of at least eight individuals were found in addition to the last three individuals who were buried there.

Probably exceptional is the single secondary burial, Grave 47. This style of deposition at R12 does not appear to be linked to a culturally codified burial practice, but represents exceptional behaviour determined by the occasional disturbance of an earlier burial.

As for the ritual, one aspect in particular needs to be emphasised. During the first season only two of the excavated graves, including Grave 33, contained cow horns. This picture has been completely reversed this year as almost all the graves were furnished with one or more bucrania highlighting the role that cattle herding must have played in the economy of Neolithic communities in northern and possibly also in central Sudan.

An unique feature of this second campaign was the occurrence in Graves 52 and 56 of a kid goat offering (Plate 1).



Plate 1. Grave 52.

<sup>1</sup> The Italian team was supported by the Centro Veneto di Studi Classici e Orientali with grants from the Ministry of Scientific Research and from the University of Venice. The team consisted of Sandro Salvatori, Donatella Usai, Agnese Cavallari, Roberto Pedrelli and Susi D'Amato (archaeologists), Federica Crivellaro (anthropologist).

<sup>2</sup> Sex and age determinations were made by Dr. F. Crivellaro.



Figure 1. General map of the cemetery excavation.

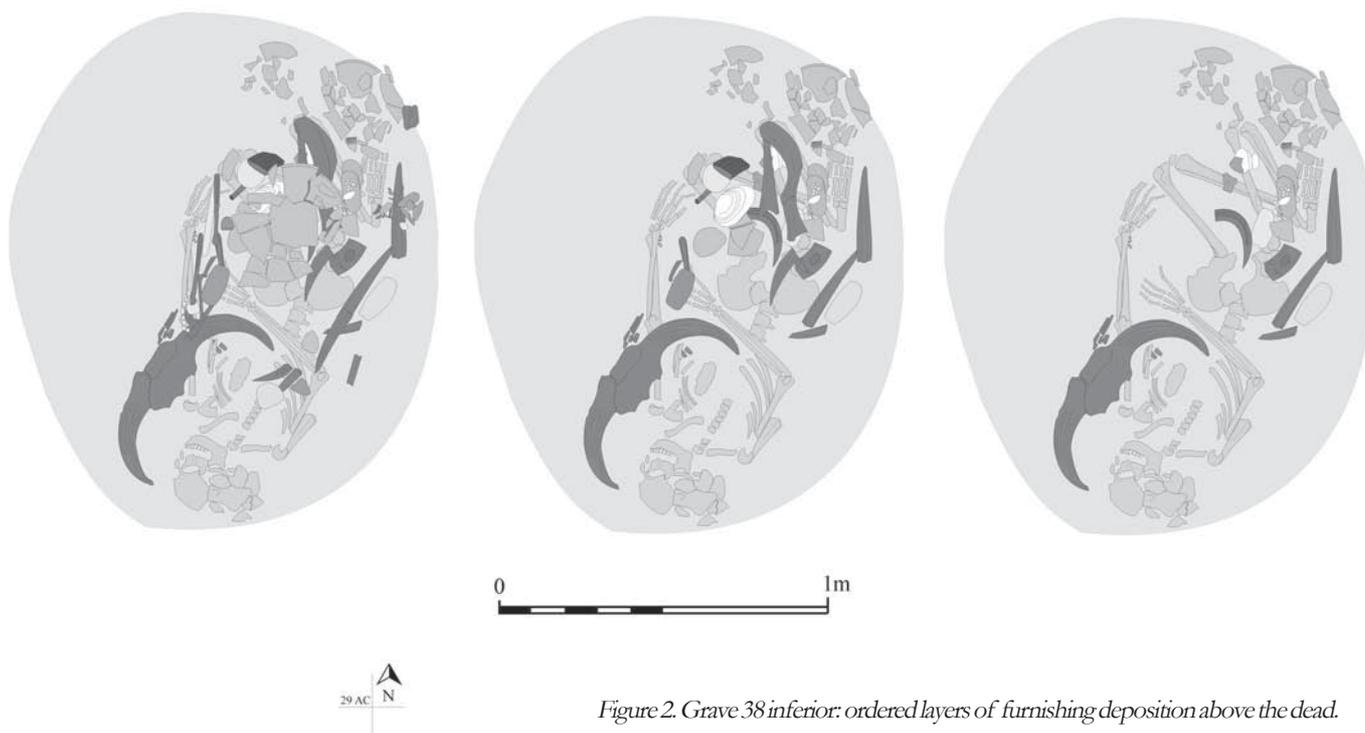


Figure 2. Grave 38 inferior: ordered layers of furnishing deposition above the dead.

At the moment it is not clear if such a practice was maintained throughout the entire time span of use of the necropolis or is only linked to the older phase, as suggested by the two recorded occurrences. In general the presence of goats is well attested to by the widespread use of ovicaprine diaphyses shaped to form bone spatulae.

In almost all the graves we recorded the presence of one or more *Aspatharia rubens* shells. Only one *Aspatharia arthamani* shell was found and was located in Grave 32 inside one of the six vessels, four of which were miniature (Figure 4.1, 3, 4-5).

The most important result of this season has been the discovery of what could be an older phase of use of the cemetery. It is characterised by graves containing richly decorated caliciform beakers (Figure 5). Unfortunately, many of these burials were disturbed and, in some cases, even

destroyed by later graves and by pits possibly of historical date. This was proved by numerous beaker fragments found in the fill of both types of features. At least four graves can be assigned to this phase (Graves 36, 47, 51 and 60), and among these only Graves 51 and 60 were undisturbed.<sup>3</sup>

Grave 36, disturbed by a large pit, produced two caliciform beakers. One was found *in situ* while the other was collected in fragments from the fill of the later pit. Grave 47, the only secondary burial, had a caliciform beaker relocated with the human bones.

Grave 60 was also a richly furnished grave of an adult male, who wore a headband made of two rows of ostrich shell annular beads and one of *Nerita polita*, a marine gastropod. This same shell type has been used for bracelets, as in the case of Grave 21 at the Neolithic cemetery of el-Kadada (Geus 1986, 22, pl. 1.3) in the Shendi area. The individual buried in Grave 60 also wore a necklace of 17 amazonite, quartz, agate and carnelian beads, together with an agate drop-shaped pendent. In addition to a caliciform beaker, two pottery jars and a large bowl, several bone tools,<sup>4</sup> stone objects<sup>5</sup> and two ochre pebbles, one yellow, the other red, were deposited around the body.

The richest grave excavated to date at R12 is the primary burial of an adult male in Grave 38. Most of the grave goods were placed on the body which was lying in the usual

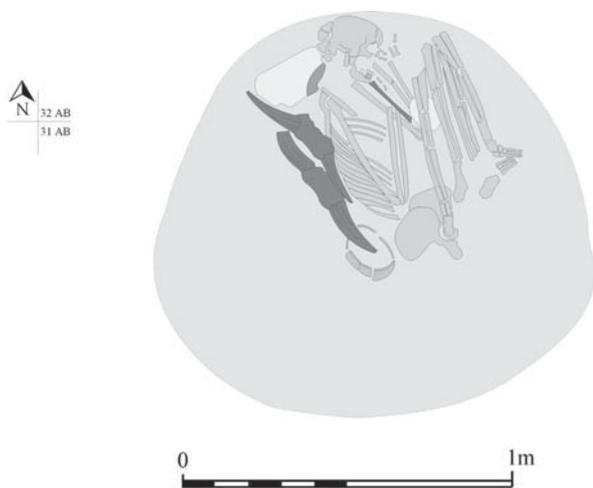


Figure 3. Grave 46.

<sup>3</sup> Grave 60 was almost completely destroyed during its excavation by a group of children, from a nearby shepherds' village, looking for treasure.

<sup>4</sup>Four spatulae from medial-distal ovicaprine diaphyses, two "knives" from large mammal ribs, two perforators and one polisher.

<sup>5</sup> One sandstone palette, one heart-shaped polisher, two chert cores and five quartzite flakes.

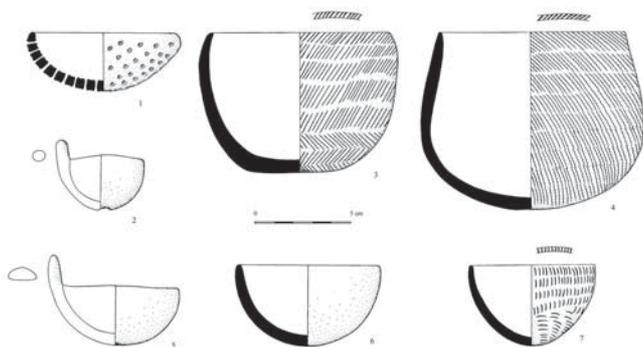


Figure 4. Miniature pots from different graves: 1, 3, 4-5 from Grave 32; 2 from Grave 39; 6 from Grave 34 (Scale 1:4).

contracted position on the left side, but oriented north-south with the head to the south, facing west and with a bucranium close to the head in front of the face. Among the grave furniture were six stone palettes, five stone axes of different raw material, finished lithic tools (nine lunates) and flint cores with their refitting flakes, various bone tools, three large bowls and a miniature jar. The deceased wore a bracelet made of four elongated small pebbles on the left wrist and a necklace of six carnelian, agate, amazonite and shell beads.

Inside one of the seven *Aspatharia rubens* shells, also found in this grave, was a group of 13 bead blanks of agate (12) and quartz (one), which were ready to be perforated and smoothed (Plate 2). Finally the presence of seven large ochre pebbles (three yellow, three red and one white) has to be mentioned (Plate 3). Extensive traces of ochre grinding were



Plate 2. *Aspatharia* shell with unfinished beads from Grave 38 inferior.

found on five of the six stone palettes and traces of ochre paste were distributed on the majority of the bone spatulae (Plate 4).

Together with the above listed objects a number of hippopotamus teeth (upper and lower canines and incisors) from more than one individual, eight primate (anthropoid ape or old world monkey) teeth, and a rectangular ivory plaque with an oval central hole were found in the deposit.

Another rich burial was that in Grave 55. Here a large set of bone (spatulae, awls, perforators, polishers; Figure 6) and stone implements (four small axes, one flint lunate, one chert tranchet, one grinding stone and one grinder) were found together with a large hole-mouth pottery jar and three large

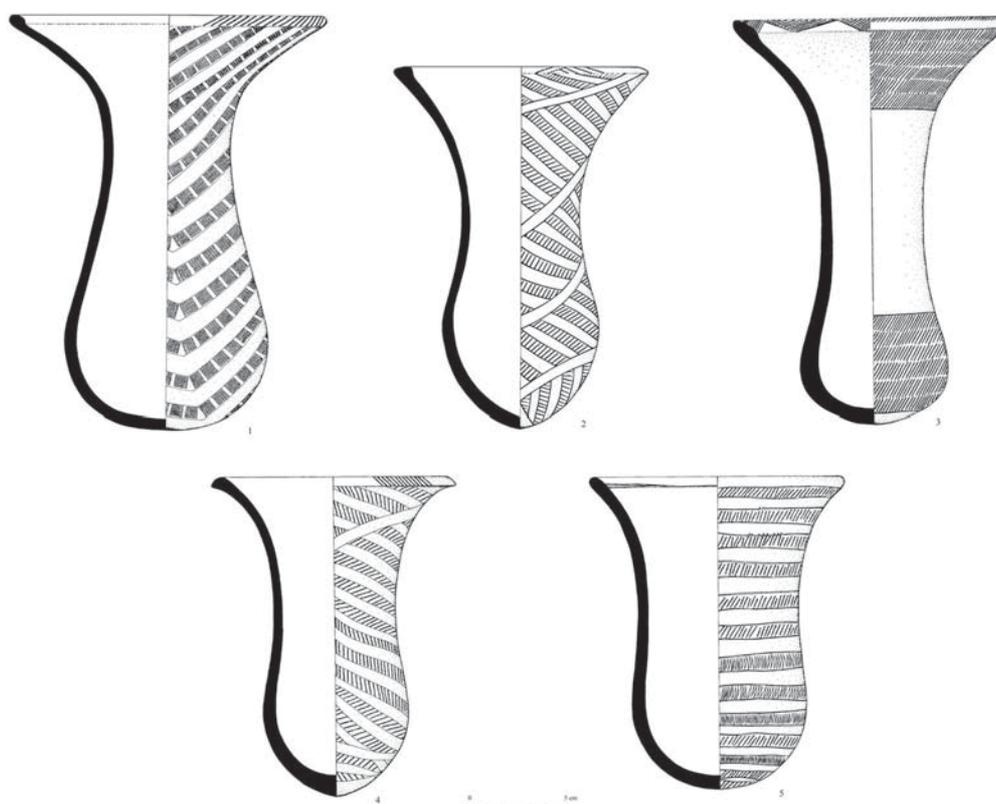


Figure 5. Caliciform beakers from different graves: 1 from Grave 60; 2 from Grave 47; 3 from Grave 51; 4-5 from Grave 36 (Scale 1:4).

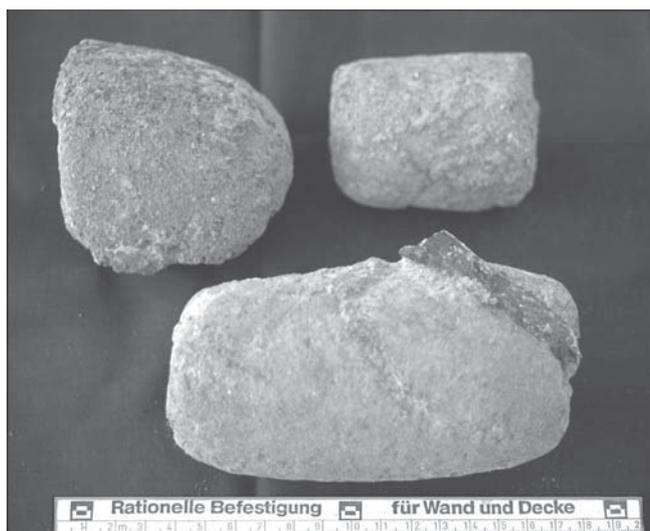


Plate 3. Lumps of red ochre from Grave 38 inferior.

*Aspatharia rubens* shells.

The most enigmatic find from the entire cemetery came from Grave 46 inferior. This object is possibly a zoomorphic figurine with a fine impressed decoration and two very small suspension holes (Figure 7). Other noteworthy objects come from Graves 44 and 56, both largely disturbed by later pits: these are, respectively, a black and white granite palette and a biconic mace-head.

Worthy of mention, finally, is the first evidence of violent death. This is indicated by the recovery, in the fill of Grave 33, of a lumbar vertebra with a flint backed piece or a lunate



Plate 4. Bone spatulae with red ochre traces from Grave 38 inferior.

still embedded in it. This discovery helps to confirm the use of lunates as arrow-heads and raises the question of conflict in ancient Neolithic societies.

While it is too early to speak about the social structure of the R12 community, as it is reasonable to expect further information and surprises from future seasons of excavation, a provisional picture of the economic and ergonomic activities practised by this group of inhabitants on the margins of the Seleim Basin can be outlined.

From the numerous economic and manufacturing activities documented at the site (Colour plate III) we can assume that the population that used this small mound to bury its dead had an economy that was richly diversified, furnishing pieces of a puzzle that remains to be closely linked to the reality of the archaeological record.

Reference is made here, for example, to the grinding stone found in Grave 50. This object immediately raises a number of questions. Is it linked to the processing of gathered or cultivated grains? Does it indirectly testify to exchange activities with farming groups? No firm answers are yet available and more data are required.

The presence of cultivation in Neolithic Sudan remains controversial, and no settlement site with evidence of farming has been clearly attested. Questions remain about the remains of barley found in the KDK1 cemetery (Reinold 2000, figure on p. 57) dating to this same period, as barley is not wild in sub-Saharan or savannah Africa (Harlan 1989; 1993). Therefore, either the grain arrived through exchange with more northerly farming societies, such as in southern Egypt, or the Nubian groups themselves were cultivating cereals originally introduced from elsewhere.

Trade is evidenced by the presence of *Nerita polita* shells from the Red Sea, fragments of malachite whose sources are not yet identified, and diorite that may have come from the mountains of the Eastern Desert.

The questions arising from the observed data in the archaeological record may also encompass the social structure. Do the many cemeteries of the Late Neolithic period, so far identified by the SARS Project, represent a population with a more sedentary way of life than usually supposed? Is a nomadic/transumant way of life really suited to groups living in such a rich environment as that of the Seleim Basin? Is winter grazing in the inner terraces, as proposed by others for Central Sudan (Håland 1987), such a realistic view? Water and grazing were available along the Nile all year round, and were particularly important during the summer. The end of the 6<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium saw a climatic shift, a deterioration of the *optimum climaticum* registered during the Middle Holocene, so that we can expect the first areas affected by this deterioration to have been those away from the Nile.

Other topical subjects of reflection are linked to the above observations: the problem of territoriality and, as a consequence, that of conflict. The presence of a violent death at R12 and the possibility that we are dealing with a largely sedentary group could be proof of a strong territoriality.

The Seleim Basin represents, thanks to its favourable environmental situation and its impressive archaeological remains, one of the richest laboratories for the study of many still unexploited facets of Late Neolithic societies in Nubia and the overall development of late prehistory in Sudan.

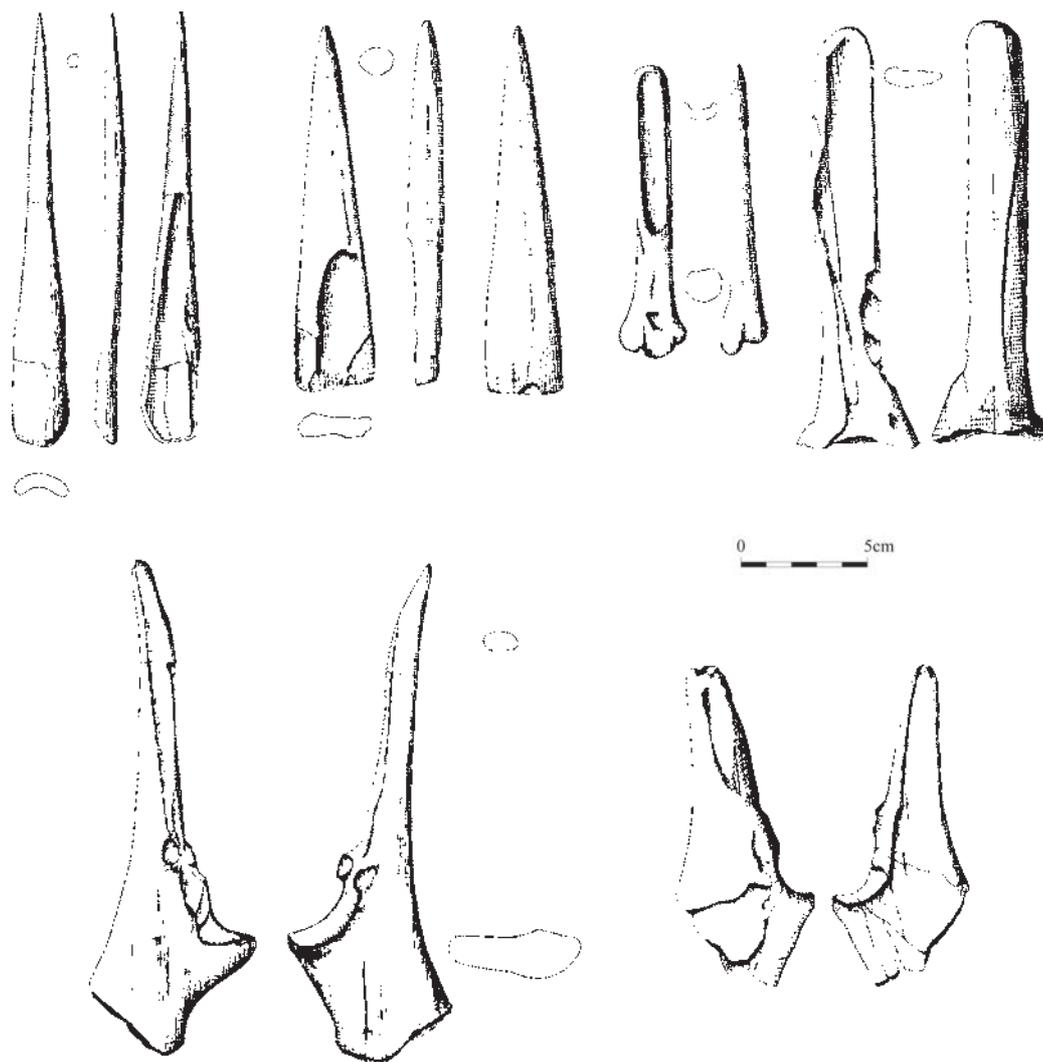


Figure 6. Bone tools from Grave 55 (Scale 1:3).

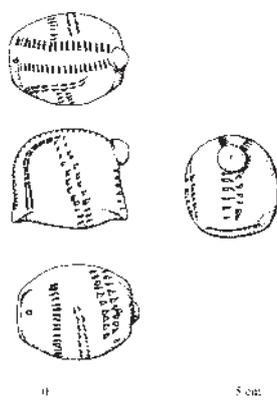


Figure 7. Terracotta zoomorphic (?) figurine from Grave 46 inferior (Scale 1:2).

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Plate I. Site R12. Grave 48.



Plate II. Site R12. Grave 33.

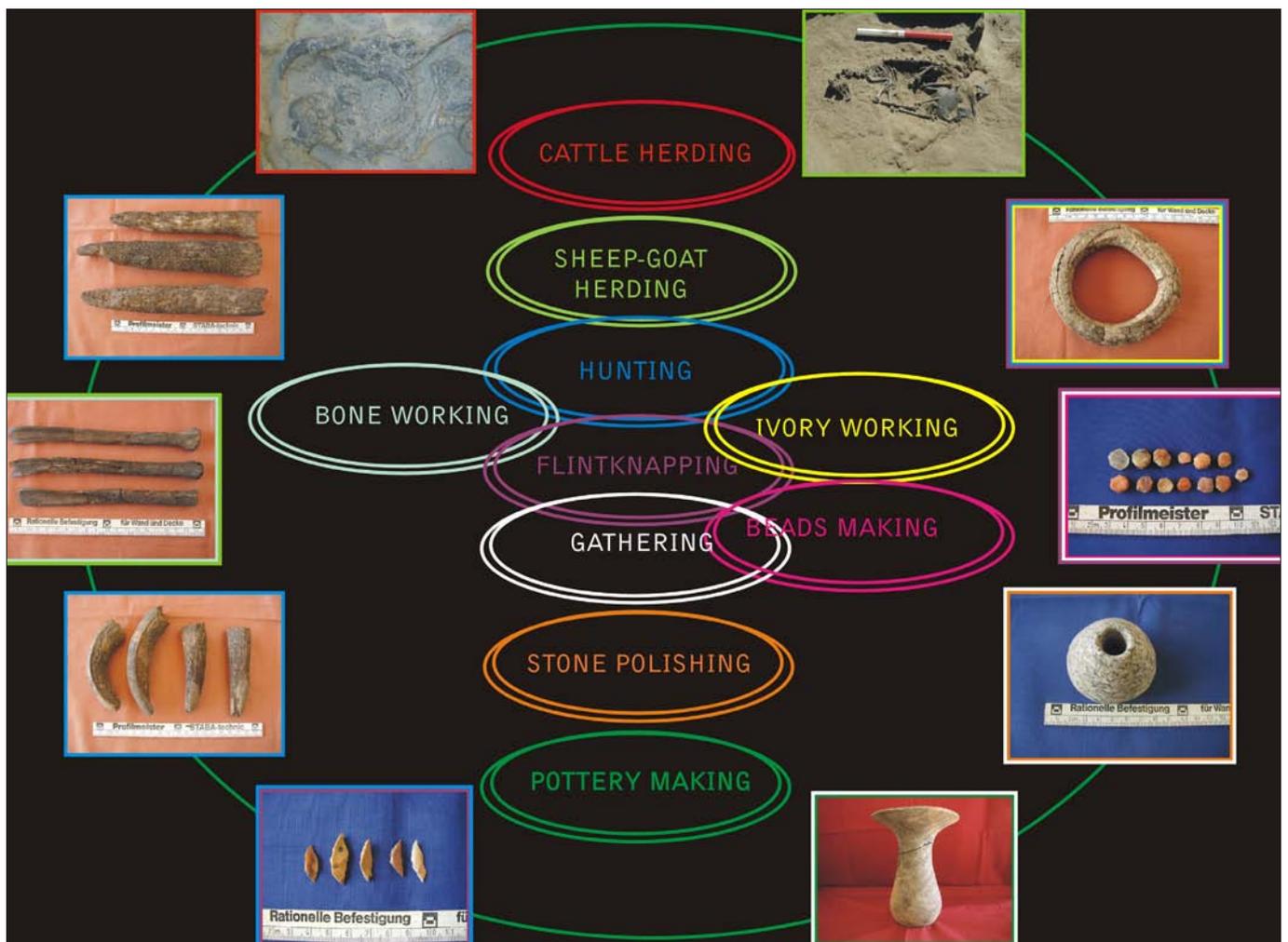


Plate III. Archaeological record and economic system at Site R12.