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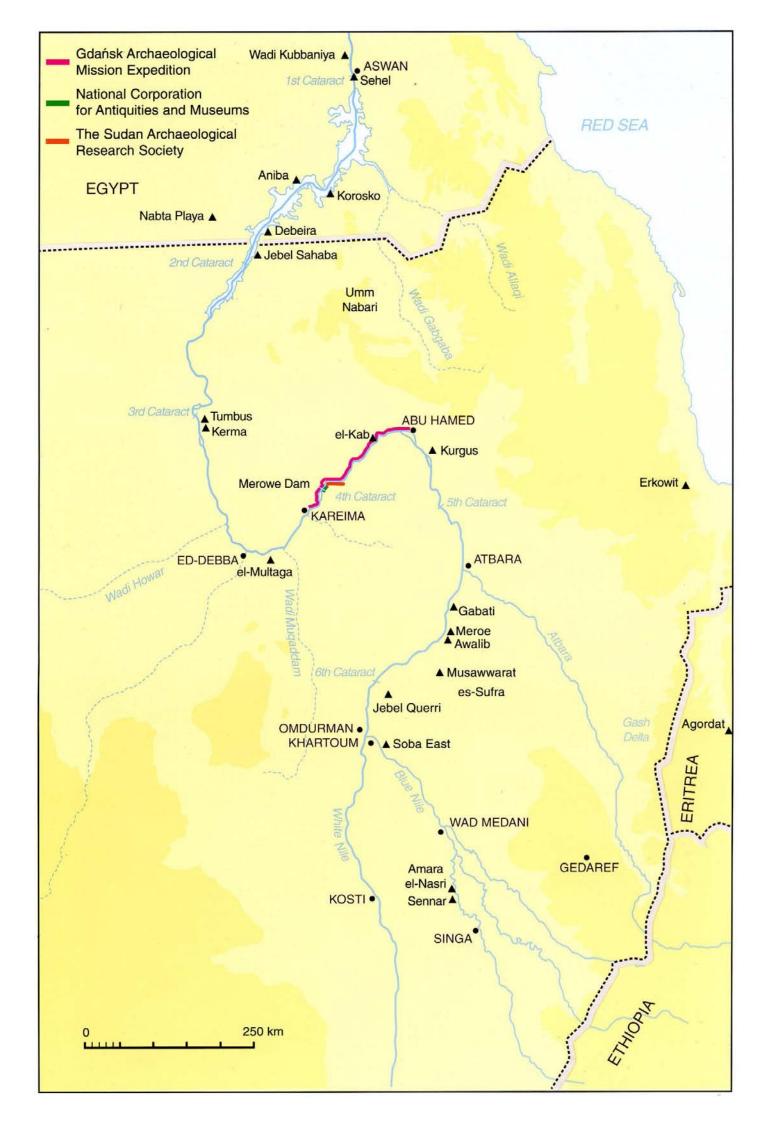
The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Bulletin No. 7

2003





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Front Cover: Sehel Island: rock-inscriptions of Viceroys of Kush.

Introduction

Vivian Davies

The Society's two major events of the year, the results of which are published here - the Kirwan Memorial Lecture delivered in October, 2002, and the colloquium on recent fieldwork held in May, 2003 – were extremely well attended. The colloquium incorporated a special session, led by Dr. Salah Mohamed Ahmed, NCAM Director of Excavations, on the Merowe Dam salvage project. The response has been encouraging. Since the colloquium, several organisations have applied for concessions, joining the existing four missions of Gdańsk, NCAM, the French Unit and SARS. Many more are still needed. Interested parties should contact Dr Salah at NCAM tel./fax. 249 11 786784 or the International Society for Nubian Studies c/o dwelsby@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk.

The Blue Nile Archaeological Salvage Project: Amara el-Nasri

Abdel Rahman Ali Mohamed

Introduction

Since the excavation of the major sites at Jebel Moya (Addison 1949; 1956), Abu Geili, Saqadi and Dar el-Mek (Crawford and Addison 1951) and Soba East (Shinnie 1955), the level of archaeological research in the area to the south of Khartoum along the banks of the Blue Nile has been far from ideal (Addison 1950), and has made little progress (Edwards 1991, 1). This may be due to the fact that many archaeological sites were destroyed by the Gezira agricultural scheme and the activities associated with the construction of Sennar Dam and other development projects. The lack of upstanding monuments comparable to those situated along the Nile Valley further to the north is another factor which may have delayed archaeological research in the area. However, continuous accidental discoveries of sites and objects have always been reported by the inhabitants of the region to the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM). Some of these sites were recorded and salvaged, others were noted for future action.

In the 1990s two projects were launched on the Blue Nile, aiming to resume the previous research and to rescue the archaeological sites endangered by urban and agricultural activities. The first project was initiated by the British Institute in East Africa to explore the full potential of Soba East (Welsby and Daniels 1991; Welsby 1998). The second project of the University of Madrid-Complutense explored the prehistoric potential of the area around Wadi Soba, Sheikh

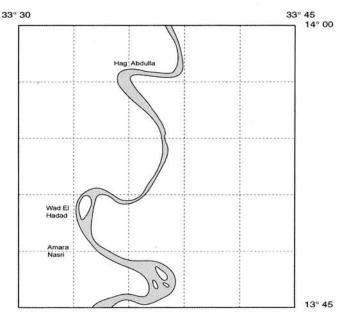


Figure 1. Location map.

Mustafa, Mahalab and Hag el-Amin (Fernandez 1992 and cf. this volume).

Site location

Amara el-Nasri (N 13° 47' 44.4", E 33° 33' 13.4") is a small village situated on the left bank of the Blue Nile, about 75km to the south of Wad Medani. It lies about 4km to the south of Wad el-Hadad town, and north east of the village of Tayba el-Batahen (Figure 1). The village of Amara was named after the Sufi Sheikh el-Nasri Wad Gendeel, whose tomb is situated 4km to the east of the present village. According to local informants, the village was transferred to its present location in the 1930s due to the occurrences of termites, which destroyed the timber supports of the houses.

The site is approximately 500m to the east of the village and covers an area of 2000 x 300m, on an undulating elongated remnant terrace of the Blue Nile. It is characterised by collapsed tombs of multiple burials, scattered human bones, some lithics and potsherds. Locally, the site is known to be a good area for quarrying soil providing building material for the village of Wad el-Hadad and neighbouring villages.

The discovery of the site

On the 5th April 2000, the Director of the Tourism Department in el-Gezera State, Mrs Tahya Shaltoot, phoned to NCAM reporting the occurrence of graves with many burials. She visited the site and collected two skulls and some potsherds. A week later the author visited the site with colleagues from NCAM to access the situation and plan future salvage activities. Searching through early documentation and the files of NCAM, the site was found to be unregistered. The nearest registered site is Wad el-Hadad (ND-36-K/3-P-2, map sheet of Sennar).

Fieldwork

The preliminary inspection and the salvage activities at Amara el-Nasri resulted in the registration and documentation of 12 archaeological features, dating from the late Neolithic, post-Meroitic and Christian periods.

Most of the archaeological remains in the area are in a poor state of preservation and endangered by natural agents such as aeolian and fluvial erosion. The human threats such as the quarrying for soil and extension of the village were halted temporarily in coordination with the local authorities at Wad el-Hadad.

The Numbering System and Documentation

The archaeological remains have been numbered consecutively from AMN 001 onwards (AMN, is the abbreviation for Amara el-Nasri). The numbers refer to the order in which the remains were found in the field, rather than to their dating.

Regarding the documentation of the excavated tombs,



burials were described according to the system used by Vila in the documentation of the Abri-Missiminia cemeteries: superstructure, grave structure, burials and finds (Vila 1978; 1982; 1984), and later adopted by Edwards at Gabati in the catalogue of post-Meroitic and Medieval graves (Edwards 1998, 72-100).

Description of the archaeological remains

AMN 001

Superstructure: destroyed

Tomb structure: a collapsed tomb with an opening of 500mm (Plate 1). It had an oval elongated shaft, measuring 2 x 1.3 x 1m, oriented east-west with a domed roof. The bottom of the shaft was filled with fine silt and wind-blown sand 500mm thick.

Burials: five inhumations with three skulls (the two other skulls were removed earlier by the tourism director). The deceased were dorsally extended and aligned east-west. There were indications that the dislocated skulls were deposited in the western part of the tomb. The deceased were superimposed over each other (1 over 2 and 3 over 4), while the fifth individual was deposited separately. It was dorsally extended with the hands adjacent to the pelvis. The skulls were deposited in different manners: skulls 3 and 4 were inverted, skull 5 was laid on the right side and facing up.

Finds: There was no material furnishing the tomb.



Plate 1. Opening of the collapsed Tomb AMN 001.

AMN 002

Superstructure: none

Tomb structure: A rectangular pit with its long axis oriented north-south measuring 3 x 2m in size. An oval opening 600mm in diameter was found at a depth of 120mm. It had been sealed with a black mud matrix bearing the fingerprints of the burial squad. When uncovered an oval shaft was revealed having rectangular rounded ends at the base (2.4 x 1.3m and 1.6m deep) with a domed roof sloping towards the bottom.

Burials: It consisted of four adult inhumations dorsally extended, aligned east-west with the head to the east. Arms

were aligned parallel to the pelvis. Skulls of individuals 1 and 2 were facing east, number 3 faced north and number 4 faced south. To the east of the four burials there was a pile of bones of an individual which appeared to have been pushed to one side to deposit the other burials. This individual was presumably the primary occupant of the tomb and pre-dated the other four burials.

Finds: in the eastern quarter of the chamber and near the pile of bones of the earliest burial, a leather container or a bottle was recovered in a very fragile state of preservation. This is a unique feature in the region, leather containers replacing pottery vessels for use in the funerary libation. However, the occurrence of leather containers has been noted at Kassinger Bahari, site No. 45, tumulus one (Paner 1998, 118) and at Jebel Ghaddar in a plundered tomb (pers. comm. Mahmoud el-Tayeb).

AMN 003

Superstructure: none

Grave structure: the grave has been destroyed by a water course (*khor*)

Burial: a disturbed burial of a child, oriented north-south, only the pelvis and part of legs were found in situ in a poor state of preservation. It seems to have been in a contracted position and may be of prehistoric date (?).

Finds: abundant ostrich eggshell disc beads were recovered from around the pelvis (Plate 2).

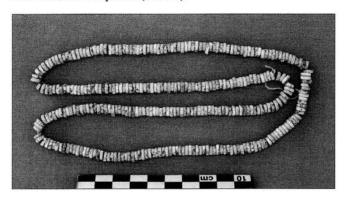


Plate 2. Ostrich eggshell beads from Tomb AMN 003.

AMN 004

Superstructure: none

Grave structure: destroyed by people quarrying soil. Only the faint outline of the limits of the grave was noted suggesting that the orientation of the gave was east-west.

Burial: destroyed, few pieces of unidentified human bones **Find**: a rim of a jar appeared at the surface on the slope of a terrace. A 2m square trench was excavated around the jar neck. At a depth of 100mm a second jar with a broken neck was found close to the south of the first jar.

Description:

Jar AMN 004, A. Hand-made wide necked jar restored and complete. The neck is reddish in colour and had a red slip. The bottom is mat impressed.

Jar AMN 004, B. (Colour plate LI).

AMN 005

Superstructure: none

Grave structure: Bee-hive tomb with an entrance 350mm in diameter (Figure 2). The clearance of the upper 100mm thick superficial deposits revealed an elliptical structure, oriented 15° north of east-west. It has a depth of 200mm. The

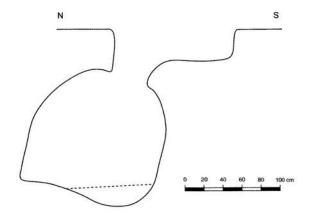


Figure 2. Section of Tomb AMN 005.

structure widened at the western side, narrowed at the eastern side and measures 2 x 1.2m. The entrance of the grave was situated at the western end of the structure. It was sealed with compact dry mud, deep brown and greyish in colour (Plate 3). The same mixture was present in a circular structure at the opposite narrow end. It was excavated to a depth of 350mm at which point the virgin soil was reached. It seems to be a 'false' opening (Plate 4). A deposit 1m thick was removed from the tomb.

Burials: the tomb contained the skulls of five inhumations (Figure 3). Three skulls were deposited in the eastern part and two in the western part. Skulls 1 and 4 faced west while skulls 2 and 3 lay on their right side facing south. Two skulls

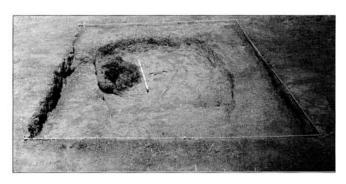


Plate 3. Compact mud sealing of Tomb AMN 005.

were deposited in the western corner: skull 6 on its left side facing north and skull 7 on its left side facing down. Skull 8 found in the centre had been completely destroyed.

Finds: none

AMN 006

Superstructure: none

Grave structure: a disturbed grave quarried by the soil diggers. It had a small oval burial chamber 200 x 250mm in size and 100mm deep oriented in a north-south direction.

Burial: a contracted burial of a child.

Finds: a variety of beads (Plate 5) were recovered scattered around and associated with the burial. They are:

- 1. three faience beads
- 2. two milky quartz beads
- 3. one amethyst bead
- 4. abundant ostrich egg shell beads
- 5. square disc beads, one bead with five holes and the other with six.

AMN 007

Superstructure: none

Grave structure: a disturbed grave oriented north-south, with a depth of 150mm.

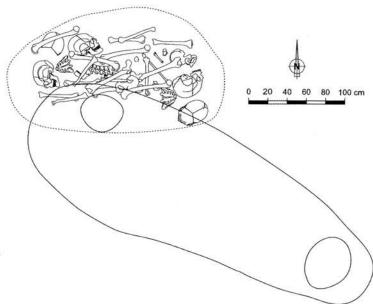


Figure 3. Burials in Tomb AMN 005.





Plate 4. The entrance of Tomb AMN 005 with the 'false' opening.



Plate 5. Beads from Tomb AMN 006.

Burial: disturbed human bones

Finds: fragments of two cups of fine blackish ware (Colour plate L) were associated with the human bones.

AMN 008

A compact mixed dry brown mortar was observed at the surface. A 2 x 2m trench was excavated around the feature to a depth of 400mm, but there is no clear cut at the surface. Whether it was actually a grave was uncertain.

AMN 009

Superstructure: none

Grave structure: a robbed tomb with an opening 500mm in diameter. A rectangular trench (2 x 1.5m), its long axis oriented north-south, was excavated around the opening of the grave to the depth of 650mm, at which point the compact hard soil was reached. An oval shaft (2.16 x 1.56m) with a domed roof was cut to a depth of 1.25m (Figure 4).

Burials: The tomb contained three inhumations:

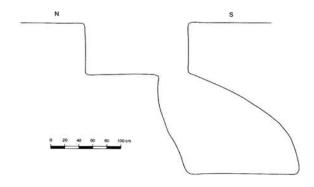


Figure 4. Section of Tomb AMN 009.

- 1. An old individual with very whitish fragile bones packed along the western side of the chamber. Only the skull was found *in situ* at the right side.
- 2. Dorsally extended adult female oriented north-south. The skull was laid at the right side facing east. The right arm lay parallel to the chest and alongside the pelvis. The left arm was folded over the chest. The pelvis was placed in a dorsal position and the legs are extended (Figure 5).
- 3. Dorsally extended individual, found under burial 2. Finds: none

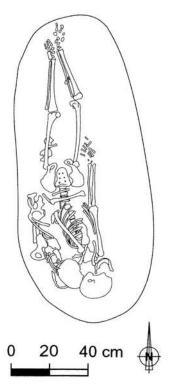


Figure 5. Secondary burial in Tomb AMN 009.

AMN 010

Superstructure: none

Grave structure: a tomb which had collapsed due to the passage of heavy vehicles loaded with the quarried soil. It had an entrance 400mm in diameter. An oval chamber with a domed roof was cleaned to a depth of 1.3m (Figure 6).

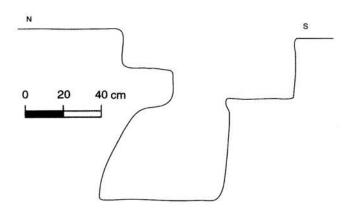


Figure 6. Section of Tomb AMN 010.

Half of the fill was wind-blown deposits.

Burials: Three inhumations oriented east-west (Figure 7).

- 1. Dorsally extended adult male with the skull placed to the east and facing north east. The right arm was aligned beside the body, the left arm extended over the pelvis. The legs were closely grouped together with the feet directed towards the west.
- 2. Dorsally extended inhumation with a broken skull. It is completely overlain by burial 3.
- 3. Dorsally extended adult female. The two arms were crossed over the pelvis.

Finds: An ostrich eggshell bead was recovered from the pelvis.

A jar was placed at the eastern side (Colour plate LII).

AMN 011

N. 13° 47' 50.5" / E. 33° 33' 22.6"

This site is located on top of a remnant terrace of the Blue Nile. The finds collected from the surface consist of the following:

- Flakes of quartz
- Fragments of eroded late Neolithic sherds.
- Very eroded unidentified human bones.

AMN 012

Superstructure: none

Located at the eastern slope of a terrace near the main road. Within the terrace there is a deposition of limonite ore (iron).

Grave structure: An eroded late Neolithic grave in a poor

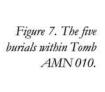
state of preservation orientated north-south. The deceased was deposited on its right side with the skull laid to the south facing east. The arms were folded in front of the face. The legs were flexed and almost completely destroyed (Plate 6). Near the elbows there was a broken cup decorated with a simple impression technique (Colour plate LIII) and fragments of a caliciform beaker (Colour plate LIV).

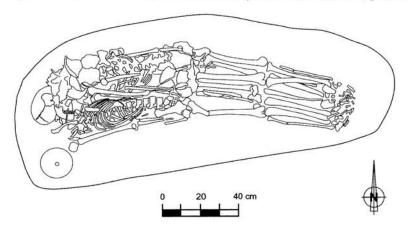


Plate 6. A late Neolithic burial.

Geomorphology of the site

The site is located on the elongated remnant terrace which was formed by the over-bank flooding of the Blue Nile. It consists of variable deposits of the alluvial sands, silts and clays. The terrace was dissected by numerous seasonal watercourses into five small sectors, which contained the archaeological deposits. At least three separate layers could be distinguished. The upper layer was of superficial deposits, wind-blown silty sand and washed deposits. This layer







extends from the surface to a depth ranging from 200-400mm and overlies the middle layer. The lower is of hard dark to darkish grey clay and silts. This is locally known as the Gezira formation, which consists mostly of dark clays and silts (the upper clay member). The clays are alkaline and of low organic matter (Martin et al. 1982, 67).

Two ecological zones were identified in the area, the flood plains and the Gezira formations. These ecological zones play a profound role in the availability of resources and opportunities they offer for settlements for the different human adaptations in the area.

The friable nature of the terrace deposits and the effect of aeolian and fluvial erosion make the identification of the buried tombs difficult. However, at some places on the cenfeldspathic material.

Tombstones

There is no indication of a tombstone *in situ* at the site; however at its northern end there were scattered fragments of sandstone blocks from a plundered circular structure which could be from a tombstone.

Discussion

The funerary customs at Amara el-Nasri can be divided into three types based on the different burials practices in the area as indicated by the type of the tombs, shaft orientation and burial attitudes (Table 1):

Tomb No.	Diameter of opening	Depth	Chamber dimensions	Orientation	No. of interments	Attitude	Preservation
1	500mm	1m	2 x 1.3m	E-W	5	Dorsally extended	Preserved
2	600mm	1.6m	2 x 1.3m	E-W	5	Dorsally extended	Preserved
3	150mm		S#1	N-S	1	Contracted	Plundered
4	-	400mm		E-W		Extended	Plundered
5	350mm			E-W	8	Dorsally extended	Preserved
8		100mm	2 x 2.5m	N-S	1		
				N-S	1		Destroyed
9	500mm	1.25m	2.16 x 1.56m	E-W	3		
10	400mm						
11							
12	100mm						

Table 1. General specifications of the graves.

tral terrace there are occurrences of compact brown mortar similar to the material covering the entrances of the collapsed tombs. This factor, however, may be as in the case of AMN 008, where no grave was found.

A single potsherd was discovered in a disturbed soil quarry. It has a monograph scratched on its surface before firing and may have been used as a stela. Parallels for the use of inscribed pottery as stelae have been found at Tamit and Old Dongola (Żurwaski 1997, 200), and near the Fourth Cataract at Mis Island (Welsby 2003, 75, no. 37; Żurawski 1999, 208-209). They were probably set into the top of mastabas (Welsby 2002, 65).

Flakes and stones Industry

The prehistoric remains were mainly observed at the most southerly end of the terrace, in association with a limonite ore deposit. The limonite (pisolites) are reddish brown with dark grey centres. The principal raw material used for manufacturing the lithic tools are milky quartz (75%), amethysts, chert and carnelian. These materials could be derived from the pebbles of quartz of Abu Geili conglomerates. However, the nearest occurrence of sandstone is at Sennar (containing more sandy and pebbly horizons). It is of medium to fine grained with intercalations of mudstones and Koalinised

Type 1. Surface burials suffering from aeolian and fluvial erosion at the slopes of the terraces, leading to the disappearance of the grave cuts. These graves were in a poor state of preservation. They are mainly of late Neolithic date.

Type 2. Shallow oval pit graves with depths varying from 150-400mm. They were usually destroyed by the local people quarrying for buildings material and were associated with different types of pot vessels, ostrich egg shell and carnelian beads. The orientation of the shallow oval pits was north-south. They are of Meroitic date

Type 3. Dome-roofed tombs, which were cut into the Gezira formation with depths ranging from 1-1.6m. This type is entered from above through a narrow opening 400-600mm in diameter. The opening is usually sealed with a very dry compact mortar and could be broken only with difficulty. The opening is usually cut at the south-east end of the grave shaft.

The burial chamber is oval with rounded ends at the base and sloping upwards to form a dome. This type is generally known as a beehive tomb. Beehive tombs have already been encountered at el-Ushara (Marshall and Adam 1951, 40-46), at Karim's Garden and Maringan (Edwards 1991, 43) and at Umm Ruweim (el-Nur and Bandi 1994, 323).

The dominant orientation of the beehive tombs and the burials in them is east-west, with slight variation of between 10-20°. The heads were placed to the west facing east. So far about eight beehive tombs have been excavated at Amara el-Nasri. The beehive tombs are dated to the post-Meiotic period. In all the three types no clear superstructure was defined.

The dominant burial attitude in the beehive tombs is the dorsally extended attitude with different positioning of the limbs. It seems that the oval burial chamber with the rounded ends favoured the dorsally extended attitude. On the other hand within these tombs some of the original burials had been moved to one side, the bones then being in no fixed orientation or attitude when the newly deposited burials were laid.

From observation of the bones it was noticed that the older original burials have poorly preserved whitish bones, and they were probably originally in a contracted rather than an extended position, while the bones of the later burials, reddish and whitish in colour, are hard and well preserved. It was always noticed that the burials were deposited at the northern side of the burial chamber leaving the southern part for the access of the burial party.

Conclusion

The site of Amara el-Nasri was used mainly as a cemetery with prolonged use during the prehistoric, Meroitic, post-Meroitic and Christian period.

The Neolithic groups are known through their cemeteries rather than through their settlement sites. There was reoccupation of the old post-Meroitic tombs by the relatively recent Christian burials. The original deceased of the tombs were disarticulated and packed randomly to one side within the same burial chamber before the Christian inhumations were deposited. This may reflect the coexistence and the interaction between these two groups of cultures.

The predominance of the hand-made pottery over the painted wheel-turned ones may indicate a decline in the tradition of pottery manufacturing in the area (Crowfoot 1927, 142).

The salvage project was funded by a generous donation from SARS with the provision of logistics support and personnel from NCAM.

Team members

This project was undertaken by the following team members: Mahmoud Suleiman, Fawzi Hassan, and Abdel Rahman Ali Mohamed.

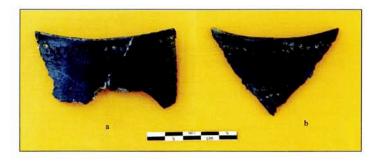
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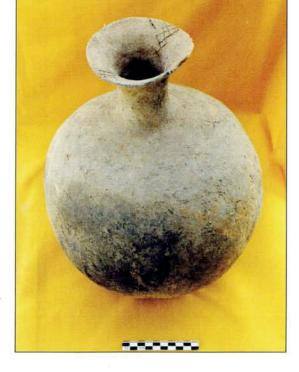


Colour plate L. Amara el-Nasri. Two blackpolished cups from Tomb AMN 007.

Colour plate XLIX. Amara el-Nasri. A narrow-mouthed jar from Tomb AMN 003.



Colour plate LI. Amara el-Nasri. A narrow-mouthed jar from Tomb AMN 004.



Colour plate LII.

Amara el-Nasri.

A narrow-mouthed jar
from Tomb AMN 010.



Colour plate LIII. Amara el-Nasri. Simple impressed pottery from Tomb AMN 012.

