

SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Bulletin No. 17

2013





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Front cover: The descendency of Tomb IV T 1 near Sedeinga under excavation (© V. Francigny / SEDAU).

Sudan & Nubia is a peer-reviewed journal



A Third Season of Rescue Excavations in the Meroitic Cemetery at Berber, October 2012: Preliminary Report

Mahmoud Suliman Bashir

Introduction

The first visit of the NCAM team to the cemetery site at Berber in 2009 aimed at evaluating the damage done to the Meroitic graves, caused by the construction of a factory for plastics production. As a result of this visit, a plan comprising three phases of rescue excavation was proposed.

During the first phase of the rescue operation in 2009, the main focus was on digging seven tombs whose burial niches or blocking wall areas had been cut by the factory's foundation trenches exposing archaeological material.

In the second season, conducted in 2010, the focus of the rescue excavation was on digging eight tombs which had been cut by the factory foundation trenches in the area where their descendaries approached the blocking walls.

The third season excavation results

A third season of rescue excavations took place in 2012.¹ In this season the focus of the work was on digging 15 tombs cut by the foundation trenches at the beginning or in the middle of their descendaries. Two trenches were also randomly proposed for surface clearance in order to locate tomb shafts (Plate 1). This season saw the completion of the rescue program and the beginning of a systematic post-excavation project.

Tombs in Area A

Tomb BMC 16

This tomb was cut by trench no. 46. The damage affected almost all of the central part of the descandary near the blockage but the blocking wall and the burial niche survived intact not being touched by the foundation trench. The fill in the descandary consists of a mixture of clay soil, lime gravel and pebbles. The blocking wall was revealed at a depth of 860mm. It consisted of three courses of mud bricks, oriented north-south and measuring 1.26m long and 0.43m high. An oval-shaped robber pit has been identified in the north-west part of the wall, where bricks of the upper part of the blocking wall were moved and sherds of a pottery jar were recovered from the fill in that area. It seems that the robber's cut lay directly over the northern part of the burial.

¹ The team members of this season were Murtada Bushara (archaeologist, NCAM), Mohammed Saad Abdalrah (physical anthropologist, NCAM), Saif Aldawla Abdelgafar (archaeologist, The Tourist Office, River Nile State), Galal Mohammed (Driver, NCAM), Wad Al Shaikh (cook, NCAM), and Mahmoud Suliman Bashir (field director).

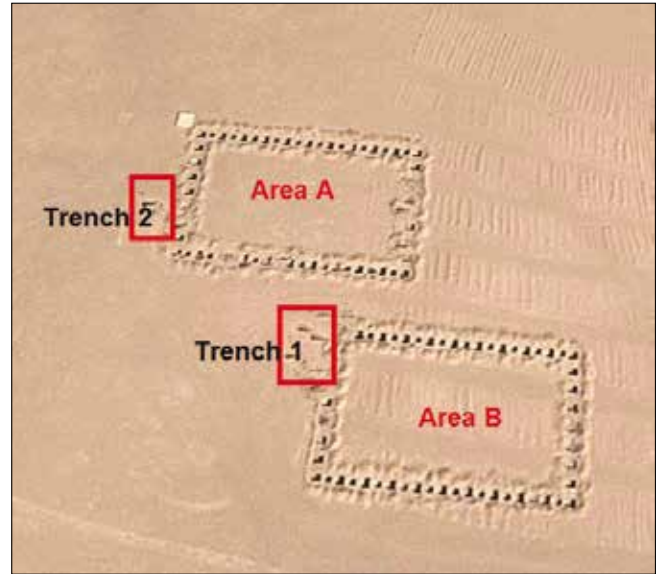


Plate 1. Google Earth Image showing the site at Berber.

Inside the tomb, two articulated skeletons were found, both at its southern side, a male at the eastern side and a female in front of it (Plate 2). Both are in a semi-flexed position, laid on their left side oriented north-south with the heads to the south facing west. The hands of the male skeleton were along the sides, the female's right hand extended across the chest and the left was extended between the legs.

The funerary furniture consisted of two pottery jars, one handmade black in colour and the other a red wheel-made jar, both located in front of the legs. Four bowls with ledge rims were found in the northern part of the burial and two other bowls with no ledges were placed, one on the right knee of the female skeleton and the second in front of the left tibia. A fineware stamped small bowl was found in front of the feet of the female skeleton between the jars.



Plate 2. Semi-flexed position in Tomb BMC 16.

Tomb BMC 17

This tomb was cut by the factory trench no. 34. The damage affected the middle part of the descandary near the blockage;

the burial and blockage area remained intact. The fill in the descandary consisted of mixture of clay soil, lime gravel and pebbles. Apparently, this tomb was reused for a child's burial, the disturbed remains of which, together with two broken handmade pottery jars, were found on top of the mud-brick blocking wall of the main burial. However, some of the intact bone shows that the skeleton had been oriented north-south and laid in a semi-flexed position on its right side, head to the north facing west. Some soft tissue was found indicating that the body had likely been wrapped in a leather hide. The blocking wall was revealed under this skeleton at a depth of 800mm. It consisted of mud bricks placed in a vertical position; however, only one brick was found intact, the rest having been destroyed by robbers.

The grave was a small oval-shaped niche measuring 900mm long and 460mm wide. An articulated skeleton was found in contracted position oriented north-south, the head to the south at a higher level compared to the rest of the body, and the entire body was facing down (Plate 3). There are clear remains of hair on the head and it seems that the body was wrapped in a leather hide.



Plate 3. Contracted body facing down in Tomb BMC 17.

Tomb BMC 18

This tomb was cut by the factory trench no. 31 which had only damaged the eastern part of the descandary. The fill in the descandary consisted of light coloured soft sand and pebbles. The blocking wall, revealed at a depth of 720mm, was a line of mud bricks placed in a vertical position sealing the small egg-shaped chamber oriented north-south measuring 690mm long, 420mm wide and 260mm high.

Inside the burial was the articulated skeleton of a child in a contracted position on its left side oriented north-south, the head to the south facing west. No finds were found in association with this child burial.

Tomb BMC 19

This tomb was cut by the factory trench no. 35. The damage affected only the central part of the descandary. The fill in the descandary consisted of soft clay soil. Potsherds and bone

fragments were noted in this filling including identifiable parts of a female skeleton. A blocking wall of mud bricks set in a vertical position was found disturbed at a depth of 1.2m. The incomplete skeleton of a male was found in front of the blockage oriented north west-south east, the head to the north west facing west. This tomb has been clearly disturbed by robbers. Inside the burial only parts of a right foot were found in the southern part and remains of a left foot were found in the northern part of the burial niche. The burial, oriented north-south, measured 1.2 x 0.65m with a maximum height of 1.65m.

Tomb BMC 20

This child burial was cut by the factory trench no. 36. The damage affected the central part of the descandary; the blocking remained intact. The blocking wall revealed at a depth of 380mm consisted of three mud bricks laid vertically. The burial, oriented north-south, was small measuring only 400mm in length and was 220mm high.

Inside the burial an articulated skeleton of an infant was found wrapped in poorly preserved material, possibly textile. The skeleton oriented north-south lay in semi-flexed position on its left side, the head to the south facing west. Remains of hair were clearly observed.

Tomb BMC 21

This child burial was cut by the factory trench no. 45. The damage affected the central part of the descandary and the blocking wall area. The northern side of the trench cuts along the southern part of the tomb including the burial niche. The burial was found disturbed and bone fragments were scattered in the grave and descandary fill. Mud bricks from the destroyed blocking wall were found in the descandary.

Tomb BMC 22

This tomb was barely distinguishable being cut by the factory trenches no. 41 and 42 in Area A. Because of time constraints this tomb was not excavated this season.

Tomb BMC 24

This tomb was cut by the factory trench no. 3. The damage affected only the eastern part of the descandary. The fill in the descandary consisted of clay soil mixed with whitish lime gravelly soil. Archaeological material consisting of sherds and fragments of wood were noted in this fill. The blocking wall revealed at a depth of 700mm, measuring 1.8m long and 0.6m wide, consisted of three courses of mud bricks with a fourth course of bricks set vertically to close off the burial niche. A robber pit was observed on the southern side of the blockage cutting part of the wall; some bricks from the upper row are missing and some potsherds were found over the wall remains.

This tomb was partially intact; the northern side of the burial was empty, a void. Inside the burial an articulated skeleton was found well preserved laid inside a poorly preserved rectangular wooden coffin² without a cover. The skeleton of

² During the excavations we decided to refill this tomb in order to



an old female lay in an extended position oriented north-south the head to the south raised up and resting on the chest facing north. The hands were alongside the body near the pelvic area (Plate 4). Considering the position of some bones it appears that the coffin was too small for the body.



Plate 4. Burial in an extended position in Tomb BMC 24.

The funerary furniture consisted of 20 ceramic vessels including fineware decorated cups and wheel-made jars found around the coffin on the north, east, and the south sides; the coffin abutted the western end of the burial (Plate 5).



Plate 5. Tomb BMC 24, funerary furniture.

A poorly preserved box made of textile measuring about 200 x 100mm and 100mm high was found in the northern end of the burial over the pottery bowls. In addition, remains of textile were recorded, which had probably been used as covers for the pottery jars.

Pieces of glass from a smashed white bottle were found in the filling inside the burial, and also a bead of faience was

protect the wooden coffin until a conservator could come and look at it. However, with the assistance of Tracey Sweek, a conservator from the British Museum, we looked again at the wooden coffin. The coffin was poorly preserved and all efforts to consolidate it were unsuccessful. Only some parts were lifted including a corner fragment.

found on the neck area and some beads near the hands and along the pelvic area.

Tomb BMC 25

This tomb was located in the factory trench no. 4, but it seems that it has been completely destroyed.

Tomb BMC 26

This tomb was cut by the factory trench no. 5. The damage affected only a small part of the eastern end of the descendary. The fill in the descendary consisted of clay soil mixed with lime gravel. A concentration of 14 ceramic vessels was revealed at the depth of 1.2m including six jars and eight bowls. The blocking wall, found under these vessels, consisted of three courses of mud bricks. The southern side of the blockage was cut by a robber pit, which was apparently located over the burial.

Inside the grave two articulated skeletons were found (Plate 6); the first on the northern side of the grave was laid in a semi-flexed position on its left side, the head to the south facing west, the hand in front of the face. The second skeleton on the southern side of the grave was laid in a contracted position on its left side, head to the south facing west, the right hand holding the right leg. Probably the body had been wrapped in a leather hide.



Plate 6. Contracted skeletons in Tomb BMC 26.

The funerary furniture found in the burial consisted of two pottery jars; both were found behind the skeleton on the southern side. One is a black handmade jar decorated with incised dots forming triangular shapes. The second is whitish in colour, painted with clear depictions of sorghum heads. In addition, some copper-alloy fittings were noted near the skeleton on the northern side of the tomb.

Tomb BMC 27

This tomb was cut by the factory trench no. 6. The damage affected the central part of the descendary near the blocking wall. The fill in the descendary consisted of a mixture of clay soil and lime gravel. The blocking wall, revealed at a depth of 600mm, consisted of four courses of mud bricks, the upper one built of bricks set vertically closing the burial chamber.

A robber pit cut the upper part of the northern end of the blocking wall where some bricks were missing.

Inside the burial an articulated skeleton was found in the southern part laid in a semi-flexed position oriented north-south, the head to the south facing up and the upper part of the body rotated so that it was almost laid on its back. The right hand was over the pelvic area and the left hand extended under the legs holding the left knee.

The funerary furniture consisted of 13 ceramic vessels including an imported painted bottle, five jars of which two were handmade and three wheel-made, and seven bowls. Most of the pottery was placed on the northern side of the burial. In addition, a *kohl* pot was found in front of the body; it is a lathe-turned cylinder of dense wood with a wide convex curved surface and a flat back found together with a wooden *kohl* stick. Different types of beads were also recorded in this burial including faience beads around the neck area, and spherical gilded beads found on the right hand.

Tomb BMC 28

This tomb, noted during the first visit, was cut by the factory trench no. 6. The excavation revealed the fill of a modern pit and no grave was found.

Tomb BMC 29

This tomb and its fill appeared in the south-west corner of the factory trench no. 60. The damage affected only a small part of the descender's eastern end. The fill in the descender consisted of whitish coloured clay soil mixed with lime gravel. The blocking wall, revealed at a depth 730mm, consisted of two courses of mud bricks. A robber pit cut the upper part of the blockage and penetrated into the burial niche.

Inside the burial an articulated skeleton was found on the southern side laid in a contracted position on its left side oriented north-south the head to the south and with the entire body twisted so that the head was almost facing down; the hands were in front of the face.

The funerary furniture consisted of nine ceramic vessels found in the northern half of the burial including five jars, one black and handmade, and four bowls.

Tombs in Area B

Tomb BMC 23

This tomb was cut by trenches no. 57 and 112. It is a large tomb with a long descender. The fill in the sloping descender consisted of soft clay soil mixed with gravel and pebbles. Five pottery jars were found at a depth of 1.5m; three are wheel-made and two handmade, all are complete but broken. The blocking wall, revealed at a depth of 1.7m under these pottery jars, consisted of three courses of mud bricks with a vertical row on top sealing the burial niche. There are missing bricks in the southern part as a result of tomb plundering which had disturbed the burials. Two skeletons were found disarticulated and disturbed, one probably originally in a flexed position, the other extended and more likely associated with a coffin. Remains of a long panel from a wooden

coffin were found at the western end inside the burial niche.

The funerary furniture consisted of six pottery bowls, four of them found on the northern side, together with two jars and two bowls revealed in the southern part. Small finds were also recorded in this tomb: beads probably of quartz, a smashed bottle of white glass and a well preserved ear stud of gold.

Tomb BMC 30

This tomb was cut by the factory trench no. 62. The damage affected the descender and approached the blockage area with part of the mud-brick blocking wall visible in the north-west corner of the trench. The blocking wall, revealed at a depth of 450mm, consisted of five courses of mud bricks; only its northern part was found intact. The robber pit was located on the northern side where most of the blocking wall bricks were missing.

The burial chamber was an oval-shaped niche oriented north-south measuring 2.4m long and 0.8m wide. Inside, an articulated skeleton was found in the southern part of the chamber oriented north-south laid in semi-flexed position on its left side, the head to the south facing west, the hands in front of the face. Two pottery bowls were found on the west side in front of the body.

The area excavations

Trench 1

Trench 1 was a 10 x 10m square located to the west of the factory trenches in area B. In this trench three tomb shafts could be distinguished after the removal of about 200mm of hard soil which consisted of gravel and pebbles.

Tomb BMC 31

This tomb is accessible via a sloping, east-west oriented descender, 4.5m long, leading to an oval-shaped north-south oriented burial chamber situated at the western end of the grave. The fill in the eastern part of the descender, considered to be the original filling, consisted of whitish coloured soft clay soil mixed with lime gravel and pebbles; however, towards the south-western part it changed to a hard clay soil, the fill of a clearly visible robber pit. The blocking wall, revealed at a depth of 1.5m, consisted of three courses of mud and red bricks. The two lower courses were laid horizontally, the upper vertically supporting a further row of bricks laid horizontally to close the burial niche. A robber pit cutting part of the southern side of the blocking wall was observed, where some bricks were missing. A complete, black, handmade pottery jar was found in front of the wall.

The burial was intact on its northern side where the cavity was completely empty of rubble. An articulated skeleton was found in the southern part of the chamber laid in a semi-flexed position on its left side oriented north-south, the head to the south facing west with the hands in front of the face.

The funerary furniture found in this burial consisted of nine ceramic vessels; four bowls were on the northernmost side of the burial covered by remains of organic material, probably leather, or perhaps these bowls had been held in a



basket. Three jars were located in the middle near the legs; one is black and handmade covered by a fineware painted cup, the other two were red and wheel-made. A black bowl was found behind the back of the body.

Small finds from this burial included a wooden *kohl* pot found on the southern side near the head. It is a lathe-turned cylinder of worked, dense wood with a wide convex carved surface on one side. A wooden *kohl* stick with a handle was also found in the fill inside the burial.

Beads of cylindrical shape with flanges at both ends made of glass and gilded were found around the hands, and well preserved different types of beads found strung together including faience beads were found around the neck together with spherical gilded glass beads.

Metal objects are also among the finds in this tomb including a well preserved copper-alloy bowl and a signet ring with a bezel found on a finger and another signet ring of iron, also with a bezel, found in the fill together with some broken iron pieces, one looking like part of a cobra figure. Also copper-alloy banding was found as well as a lock probably from a box.

Tomb BMC 32

Traces of this tomb were distinguished on the surface by the whitish colour of the soil. The fill in the descandary consisted of lime gravel and soft clay soil in the eastern side and hard clay soil include potsherds and human bones fragment in the western side, where traces of a robber pit were located. The blocking wall, revealed at a depth 550mm, consisted of three courses of mud bricks, the upper laid vertically. The robber pit cuts through the northern part from the surface to the blocking wall where some bricks on that side were missing. Some modern material including plastic bags and paper were noted in the fill of the robber pit, which indicates modern robbing.

Inside the burial an articulated skeleton was found intact in the southern side of the niche laid in a flexed position on its left side oriented north-south, the head to the south facing west, the hands in front of the face. On the northern side of the burial two child skeletons were found disturbed as a result of plundering activities, which had a clear effect on this side of the burial. One was laid in flexed position on its left side oriented north west to south east, the head to the south east facing west. Some remains of soft tissue of human skin were observed on the bones. Beneath its pelvic bones the skull of the second child was found.

The funerary furniture consisted of one pottery beer jar found in the centre of the burial and four bowls, two scattered in the middle, one behind the back of the adult skeleton, and one between the jar and the body.

The small finds in this grave include a unique type of rectangular gilded-glass bead. This type, found associated with the child skeleton, consisted of seven gold-coloured beads, six of which were complete. There is a fabric impression on one side and on the other human figures portrayed in a Graeco-Roman style.

Tomb BMC 33

This tomb was distinguished by the whitish colour of its fill after the clearance of the surface. The tomb has an east-west sloping descandary 4.55m long leading to an oval-shaped north-south burial niche at the western end. The fill in the descandary consisted of soft clay soil mixed with white lime gravel in the eastern side and hard clay soil mixed with sand in the western side, where traces of a later pit were noted. A later burial was revealed indicating the reuse of the tomb; the skeleton accompanied by funerary furniture lay over the blocking wall. It was in a flexed position on its left side oriented north-south, the head to the south facing west, the hands in front of the face. Accompanying the deceased were ten ceramic vessels; seven bowls and three jars.

The blocking wall, revealed under the later burial at a depth of 1.8m, consisted of three courses of mud bricks, the upper row set vertically. In addition, some potsherds and a fragment of a grinding stone were also incorporated into the wall. The southern side was cut by a robber pit presumably dating to the time of the reuse of the tomb.

Inside the grave a disturbed skeleton was found laid in a semi-flexed position on its left side oriented north-south, the head to the south probably facing west (Plate 7).



Plate 7. Reuse of the tombs; the later burial in Tomb BMC 33.

The funerary furniture consisted of eight ceramic vessels, three jars and five bowls. One painted jar was found in the middle over the legs, a large rounded jar was found in the northernmost end together with the third one. The bowls were found in the middle including a fineware painted and stamped bowl with a frieze of cobras along its upper part.

The small finds recovered from this tomb are white coloured cylindrical beads with flanges at both ends made of glass, black beads of stone, spherical gilded-glass beads, two beads of stone, an ear stud of gold with a clear depiction of the god Bes on its exterior surface (Plate 14), and a well preserved coloured glass bottle (Plate 18). These finds indicate the richness of this grave.

Trench 2

Trench 2, 8m square, was located to the west of the factory trenches at area A, and only tomb BMC 34 was excavated within it. However, traces of more tomb shafts were observed in this trench.

Tomb BMC 34

This tomb was distinguished by the clear whitish colour of its fill after the clearance of the surface. The structure of the tomb represented a different type consisting of an east-west sloping descandary 4.5m long leading to a rectangular shaped east-west burial chamber at the western end. The fill in the descandary was a mixture of soft clay soil and pebbles. The blocking wall revealed at the depth 1.45m consisted of an irregular wall of mud bricks. The upper part of the wall was cut by a robber pit and the bricks had been removed. Apparently, the plundering had an effect on the eastern side of the burial.

The burial cavity was found empty of rubble and its roof was intact. The partially articulated skeleton was laid on its back on a wooden bed with no legs or more probably a bier in an extended position orientated east-west, the head to the west (Plate 8).



Plate 8. The extended burial in Tomb BMC 34.

The funerary furniture consisted of three handmade pottery beer jars, one example decorated with incised lines along the rim, shoulders and the neck. The jars were found on the southern side, one on top of the right leg, and it seems that they had been moved during plundering.

General Remarks

Tomb structure

Regarding the tomb structures, two different types of burial

substructure can be distinguished in the excavated tombs at Berber cemetery; both were accessible via a sloping, east-west oriented descandary leading to either an oval-shaped north-south orientated burial chamber situated at the western end of the grave (Figures 1 and 2), or rectangular shaped east-west burial chamber looking somewhat 'foot-shaped' in section (Figures 3 and 4). At the end of the descandary, a blocking wall of mud bricks sealed the burial chamber.

This rectangular axial, east-west chamber is one of the two forms of grave substructure also known from the Meroitic cemetery at Gabati (Edwards 1998), together with the oval shaped north-south chambers, which were the norm at Gabati and Dangeil as at Berber (Bashir 2010).

Positions

The position and orientation of the bodies point to different cultural traditions. The positions documented thus far are:

Extended position – The body lying on its back and the hands resting on the pelvic area. The skeletons were orientated north-south with the head to the south. Normally, this position has been found in association with wooden coffins (Plate 4). The skeleton in Tomb 34 was found in an extended position on its back orientated east-west with the head to the west. The body was buried on a wooden bed with no legs or more probably a bier (Plate 8).

Semi-flexed position – The body laid on its left side and commonly orientated north-south, with the head to the south facing west. In such graves, the burial of more than one skeleton was often observed, which highlights the importance of conducting a detailed physical anthropological study in order to possibly identify any relationships between the individuals (Plate 2).

Contracted – The body orientated north-south, on its left side with the hands around or holding the legs (Plate 6), and with the head to the south facing west; however, in one example, the entire body was facing down (Plate 3).

Human remains

Physical anthropological study of the human remains from Berber was carried out under the umbrella of the Amara West Workshop for Physical Anthropology in 2011; however, the well preserved skeletons from Berber have encouraged our colleagues Michaela Binder and Mohammed Saad Abdalah to initiate the Bio-archaeology of Berber Meroitic Cemetery Project.

The good state of preservation in the excavated tombs at Berber is clear. All skeletons were at least 90% complete and in several cases considerable amounts of hair and soft tissue were preserved. The study is focusing on the identification of sex and age, palaeo-pathology, infectious disease, trauma and dental pathologies.

At present the skeletons from the excavated tombs represent only a very small sample which may not be representative of the entire group: therefore, any results can only be seen as preliminary. With more skeletons available it is hoped to



Figure 1. Tomb BMC 33, top plan showing the common burial type at Berber.

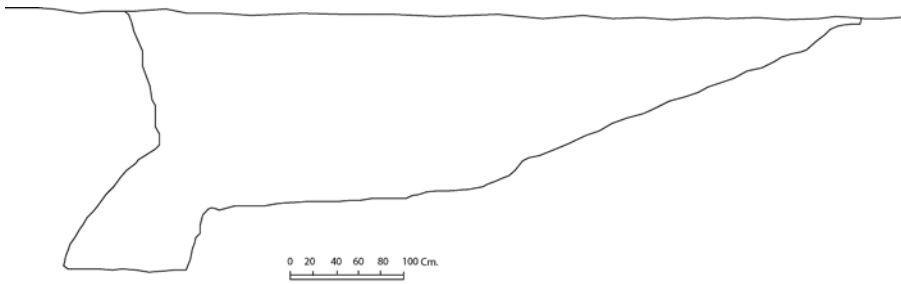


Figure 2. Tomb BMC33, section showing the common burial type at Berber.

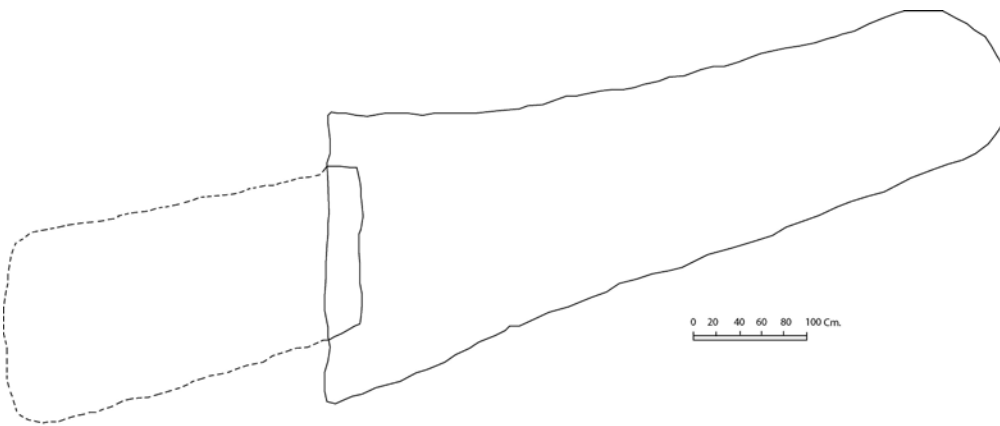


Figure 3. Top plan of Tomb BMC 34.

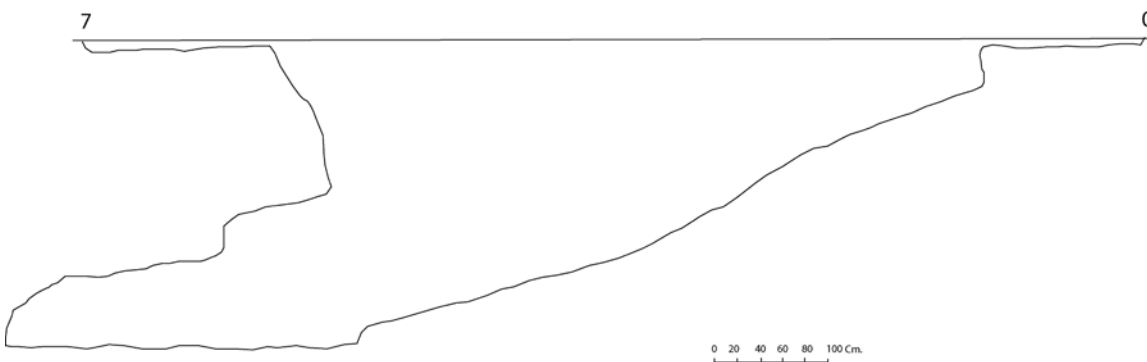


Figure 4. Section of Tomb BMC 34.

extend this study and to integrate further contextual data about subsistence and modes of settlement in order to obtain a better understanding of health and living conditions of the people inhabiting the Berber Region during the later Kushite period.

The archaeological material

The excavated tombs from this season yielded a large number of objects, of great diversity in both the type of material and

the quantity found in each tomb. Pottery vessels, small finds and objects made of wood are the most common.

Pottery

There is a wide variety of ceramic forms amongst the large amount of pottery vessels recovered from Berber. The most common fabric type is a rather fine, quite hard and dense silt ware. Only bowls, of various shapes, were made using this fabric (Bashir and David 2011). Fineware examples

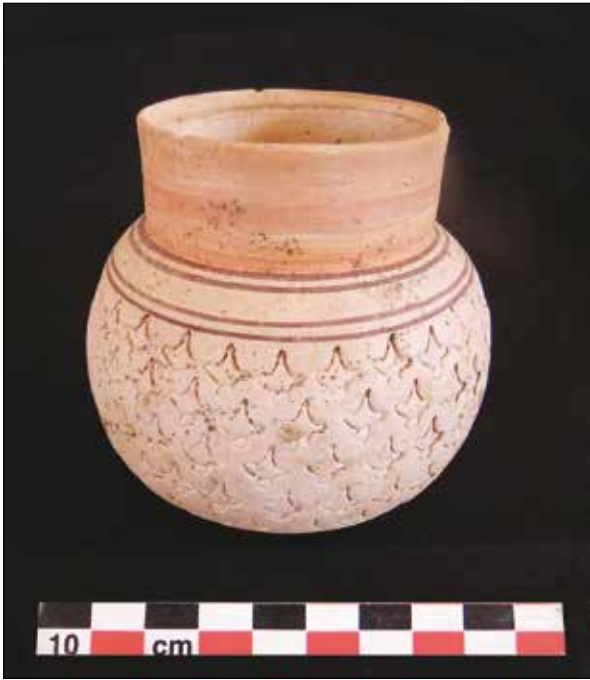


Plate 9. Fineware pottery cup from Tomb BMC 16.

are well represented in the excavated tombs (Plate 9). They include a number of cups and bowls made from a smooth, quite hard and dense clay, white to pinkish in colour, painted and sometimes stamped, together with one example of an imported ointment bottle with a handle. In addition, another example of a painted jar with floral pattern was found this season. The beer jar has a clearly distinguishable painting of sorghum heads (Plate 10).

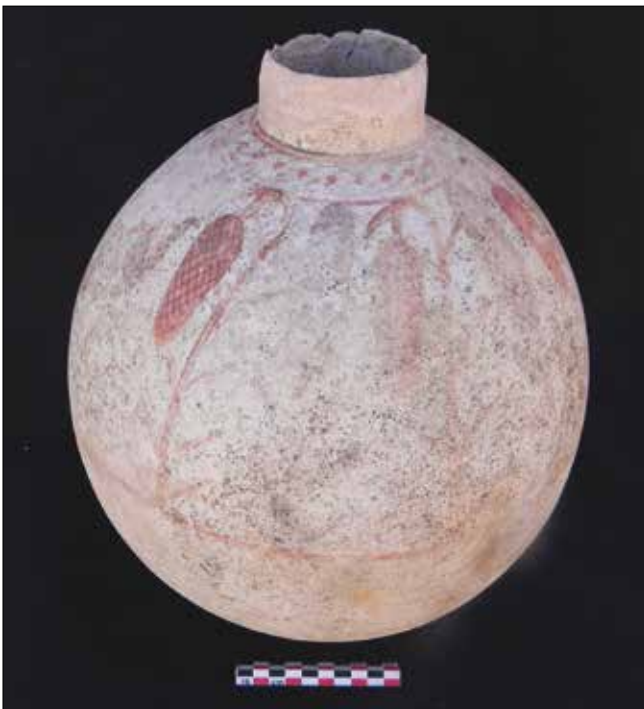


Plate 10. Pottery jar with painting of sorghum heads from Tomb BMC 26.

In Tomb 34, pottery beer jars that appear different from the pottery found in the other excavated tombs were discovered and there were no other materials. These pottery jars are handmade with decoration along the rim, shoulders and the neck in one example (Plate 11).



Plate 11. Decorated pottery jar from Tomb BMC 34.

Beads

In the excavated tombs at Berber a considerable number of different types of beads have been found. Among the recovered beads this season is a unique type of rectangular gilded-glass bead. This type was found associated with the child in Tomb BMC 32, where a total of seven were recovered. There is a fabric impression on one side and on the other human figures, portrayed in a Graeco-Roman style (Plate 12).

There are also large numbers of other types of gilded-glass beads. Among them is a unique type of cylindrical bead, with flanges at both ends, several of which, found around



Plate 12. Glass beads with human figures on one side from Tomb BMC 32.



the hands in an intact burial, possibly represent the remains of a bracelet (Plate 13).



Plate 13. Gilded-glass beads in Tomb BMC 31.

Gold

Two gold ear studs were found in the fill of the burial chambers of Tombs 23 and 33, one bearing an image of the god Bes (Plate 14).



Plate 14. Gold ear stud with a clear depiction of the god Bes found in Tomb BMC 33.

Wood

Containers of wood probably ebony, such as kohl pots, are common finds in many Meroitic cemeteries; however, the well-preserved examples from Berber are among the few found in central Sudan. The kohl pots are lathe-turned cylinders of dense wood. Two well-preserved examples found this season have a wide convex carved surface on one side (Plate 15). Wood is also present in this cemetery in the form of coffins. Three further examples indicating the use of coffins were noticed. In one, long pieces of wood protected the body and in another it looks like a box. The third example is the possible bier in Tomb 34.



Plate 15. Wooden kohl pot from Tomb BMC 31.

Textile

The objects recovered this season included a poorly preserved box made of textile (Plate 16) which was found in the partially intact Tomb 24. Its function is unknown. Also traces of textile were observed in some of the burials associated with pottery, which we think may have been used as a cover for these pottery jars.

Copper alloy

The copper-alloy bowls discovered this season were in excellent condition and can be considered among the best preserved finds from the cemetery. Copper-alloy finger rings are



Plate 16. Box of textile found in Tomb BMC 24.

also common and include an example of a uniquely-shaped signet ring with a bezel (Plate 17). Copper-alloy fasteners were also well documented in a number of the tombs.



Plate 17. Copper-alloy signet ring from Tomb BMC 31.

Glass

Glass bottles are also often found in the excavated tombs. A well preserved example of a coloured glass bottle, similar to the well-known one from Meroe, now in the Sudan National Museum (SNM 525), was found this season (Plate 18), and a number of smashed glass bottles were noted.



Plate 18. Coloured glass bottle from Tomb BMC 33.

Concluding Remarks

The excavated tombs at Berber generally show a good state of preservation and some burials are largely intact. However, different degrees of tomb plundering are noticeable; it seems that the various tombs at Berber were plundered only once. Some examples show that the plundering affected only one side of the burial chamber.

The reuse of tombs is one of the features noted in the excavated tombs at Berber. One example is where the original skeleton was piled to one side. In the second example the later body lies on top of the earlier blockage together with its grave goods (Plate 7).

The variety of ceramic forms and the large amount of pottery vessels recovered from Berber, as well as the exceptional preservation of the contexts, offer a good opportunity for the understanding of Meroitic funerary ceramics in the region.

Among the pottery beer jars, painted jars with floral patterns have been found. These beer jars have decorative motifs of sorghum with painted sorghum heads. The depiction of sorghum on beer jars that have been originally made to be used in funerary rituals is clear proof of the importance and the role of sorghum in the local beliefs and traditions (Bashir and David 2011). In addition, it is important to note that sorghum in modern times represents the main cereal for bread and local beer making and is considered as the main item in the region's food culture.

The material found in the Meroitic cemetery at Berber is quite varied. Some may be associated with areas to the south such as objects made of ivory and the dense ebony wood. There are also the glass bottles and the beads with human figures of Graeco-Roman style together with the copper-alloy artifacts, some of which most probably came from the far north.

In view of this evidence, it is important to briefly note the location of Berber. It occupies the region north of the numerous Meroitic centres in the Island of Meroe, and is south of the major sites around Napata as well as those much further to the north. This geographic position has given the region the role of a trade cross-roads. In the recent history of the Sudan, the city of Berber was known as one of the main caravan stations on the route between the Red Sea and Egypt and from early Islamic times as a stop on the pilgrimage route to Mecca. It is probable that in the past the region of Berber played the same role in linking the Eastern Desert with the Nile and the Island of Meroe with the northern part of the kingdom; but the most important factor in this context is the position of the Berber area at one end of the route across the Bayuda Desert between the region of Napata and the north, and that of Meroe in the south.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my deep thanks and gratitude to the Sudan Archaeological Research Society (SARS) for providing the funds and giving me this opportunity to continue excavation at such an important site. My thanks go to Derek Welsby



and Neal Spencer for their support and encouragement. I am also very grateful for the generous assistance received from Vivian Davies and Renée Friedman which helped in the fulfillment of this field season. Finally, I would like to thank Claude Rilly the director of SFDAS for his generous support by providing a car for the field operations and for his visit to the site during the excavation.

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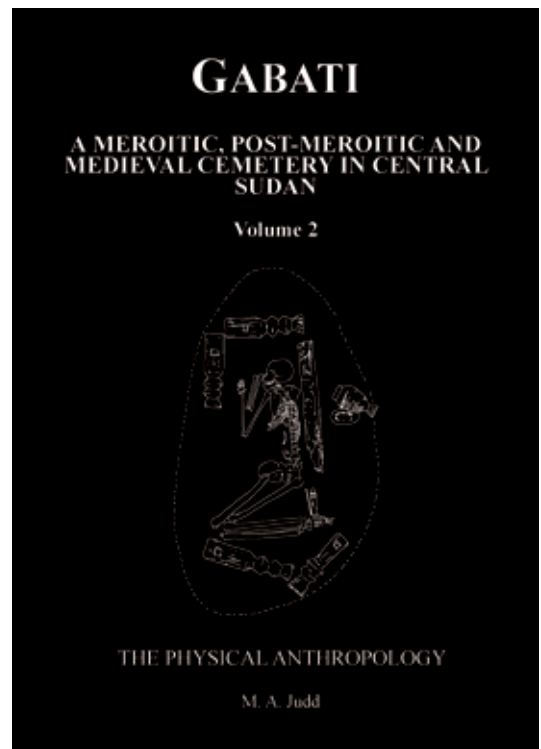
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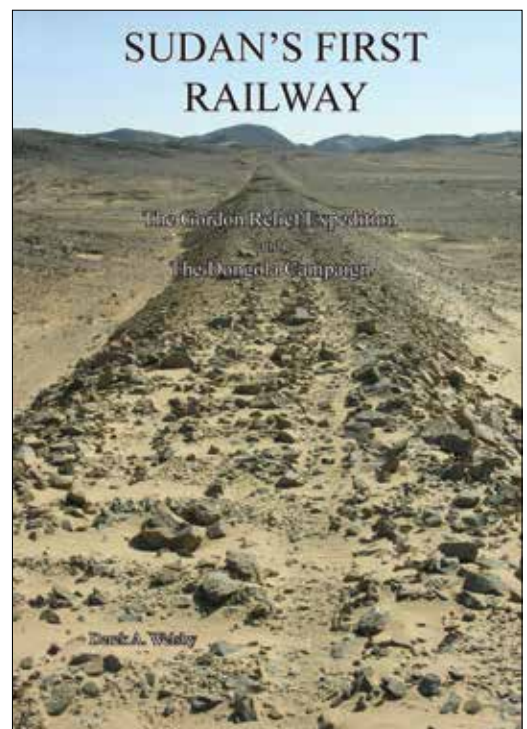
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