

NEW FINDS OF THE TWENTY-FIFTH DYNASTY PERIOD FROM EL-KURRU, SUDAN

GEOFF EMBERLING* (UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN)

SAMI ELAMIN (SUDAN NATIONAL CORPORATION FOR ANTIQUITIES AND MUSEUMS)

Archaeology sometimes tempts us with knowledge that is just beyond our grasp, and with the idea that we might be able to find out more with the right combination of perseverance, luck, and funding. The site of El-Kurru in northern Sudan offered us just such temptation.

El-Kurru is part of a complex of clustered and functionally interrelated group of sites (figs 1–2) that together formed the core of the empire of Kush during what is called its Napatan period (ca. 850–300 BCE). The central site is Jebel Barkal (ancient Napata), which was the location of a royal palace¹ and temple complex centring on the massive Temple of Amun;² the corresponding settlement has recently been located nearby³ and a group of pyramids at the site dates to the end of this period.⁴ An earlier royal pyramid cemetery of kings and queens of Kush was located at El-Kurru and a later cemetery at Nuri.⁵ Across the Nile from Barkal was the settlement of Sanam,⁶ which appears to have been a royal workshop and trade centre, with a series of massive storehouses and enclosures. On one side of the site, a temple to the god Amun was built for the Kushite king Taharqo,⁷ and a cemetery of over 1500 burials

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1 Most recently, Kendall and Wolf 2007.

2 Reisner 1917; Dunham 1970.

3 Tucker and Emberling 2016.

4 Particularly tombs Bar. 11–13; Dunham 1957.

5 Dunham 1955; a new project at the site is directed by Pearce Paul Creasman.

6 Vincentelli 2018 with references; Tucker et al. 2019.

7 Pope 2014; Howley 2018.

spanned the time from the Egyptian New Kingdom into the Napatan period.⁸ A nearby cemetery at Et-Tameer contained higher status Napatan burials,⁹ and several collective rock-cut tombs dating from the New Kingdom to Napatan periods were excavated at Hillat el-Arab next to Barkal.¹⁰



FIG. 1: Regional map showing sites mentioned in the text. (Map: Samuel R. Burns.)

8 Griffith 1923; Lohwasser 2010, 2012.

9 Mohamed 2018.

10 Vincentelli 2006.



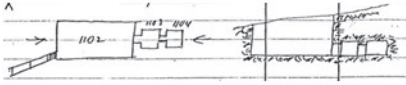
FIG. 2: Local map showing sites in the ‘heartland’ of Kush during the Napatan period (ca. 850–300 BCE).

El-Kurru had been known since George Reisner’s work in 1919 as the early royal pyramid cemetery of kings and queens of Kush, including some who ruled over Egypt as its Twenty-fifth Dynasty (ca. 750–653 BCE), with an early conquest of Aswan, and eventually ruling from both Thebes and Memphis.¹¹ Timothy Kendall found in re-reading Reisner’s field diaries that Reisner had located five structures (fig. 3) around the royal cemetery that he did not publish (or indeed fully excavate), and Kendall thus proposed that El-Kurru was also the site of a walled town and palace of ancient Kush.¹²

¹¹ Reisner 1919; finds published more fully by Dunham 1950. El-Kurru had previously been documented by the Lepsius expedition in 1844 (Lepsius 1849 Band II: 122–23; Lepsius 1913: 254–55).

¹² Kendall 1999: 47–49.

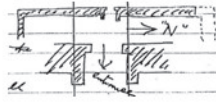
It has always been somewhat of a mystery why these kings of Kush were buried at El-Kurru. The site is not particularly favoured with natural resources, with a wide agricultural area, or by close connections to routes across the deserts to the north or south. It seems an example of a historical accident – perhaps a particularly charismatic family began to gather political authority, and chose their ancestral village as the location of their royal tombs. There must have been a local settlement to support construction of the pyramids, however.



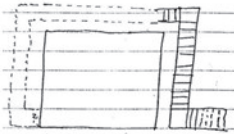
Ku. 1100—small funerary temple



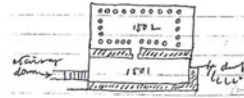
Ku. 1200—portion of fortification wall



Ku. 1300—town wall and gate (200 meters long)



Ku. 1400—rock-cut well



Ku. 1500—large funerary temple

FIG. 3: Structures found by Reisner at El-Kurru (from sketches in his field diary now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

Thus, based in part on Kendall's suggestion, we began a project at El-Kurru in 2013 with the goal of investigating this possible royal city.¹³ As Kendall noted,¹⁴ the structures Reisner found were not identified on any plan, so it was not clear where they might be located. We were also interested in the possibility of locating burials of nonroyal individuals who might also have lived, worked, and been buried near the royal cemetery.

This paper explains the unexpected way that we eventually achieved our goal of learning a little more about the period of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty at El-Kurru. It is a pleasure to write this note in honour of Emily Teeter. One

¹³ Our project was co-directed by Geoff Emberling (University of Michigan) and Rachael J. Dann (University of Copenhagen), with generous funding from the Qatar-Sudan Archaeological Project, Ms. Kathleen Picken, and the National Geographic Society. Sami Elamin (National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums) has been the Sudanese government inspector for the project since 2017.

¹⁴ Kendall 1999: 49.

of us (Emberling) had the good fortune to work closely with Emily at the Oriental Institute for more than 6 years and learned a great deal about Egypt and museums from her. It was a particularly rich and fruitful collaboration that generated museum exhibits, public programmes, and publications.¹⁵ It was also a lot of fun!¹⁶

NEW EXCAVATIONS AT EL-KURRU

Our initial challenge at El-Kurru was simply to locate the structures Reisner had found. We imagined that a combination of surface survey, multispectral satellite imagery, geophysical prospection, and high resolution topographic mapping in and around the village would allow us to locate the structures easily. In fact, after reading Reisner's field diaries carefully and noting any hints he gave about their locations, we found the outline of one of the structures – the larger funerary temple he termed Ku. 1500 – clearly visible on Google Earth. The other structures remained elusive through much of our first season. We asked people in El-Kurru village if they knew of any ancient remains in the landscape, and we went to a number of locations in the palm groves and inside the courtyards of houses, none of which was particularly promising. We started a programme of test pits in the palm groves anyway,¹⁷ hoping that if we dug deep enough, we would find something ancient in the Nile mud, but without success. It was only when we had been working in the village for 4 weeks and had begun to gain some trust (in particular, showing that we were not looking to find gold, which is the local assumption about archaeologists) that people in the village began to give us better information. This culminated in a visit by one older man, Hassan Mohamed Othman, who said his grandfather had worked with Reisner and that he remembered a story about a well – and he proceeded to draw a plan of the rock-cut well and stairs in the sand that matched the drawing in Reisner's field diary.¹⁸ He showed us exactly where the well was, and another older man named Babikir Ahmed Khalifa, who regularly rode his donkey past us as we were working, pointed out an area that turned out to be the location of the town wall and gate. We were later told about the location of the smaller rock-cut funerary temple (after we had spent fruitless weeks digging in its general vicinity).

During our first two seasons at El-Kurru, we were thus able to locate four of Reisner's five structures – a town wall and gate, a large square rock-cut well, and two rock-cut structures that Reisner identified as funerary temples. By the end of our fourth season in 2016, we had excavated and documented

¹⁵ E.g. Emberling and Teeter 2010.

¹⁶ Emily has heard some of the story presented here in a lecture Emberling gave for the Chicago ARCE chapter in 2018. Note that finalizing this paper during the COVID-19 pandemic has restricted our ability to consult some references.

¹⁷ Skuldbøl 2013.

¹⁸ This episode was recreated by the same Mr. Hassan in a 2019 film, 'Lost Kingdom of the Black Pharaohs' (Science Channel).

those structures as well as clearing the largest pyramid at the site (Ku. 1), which Reisner had only partially excavated.¹⁹

However, our excavations showed clearly that none of these structures related to the time of what we might call the Middle Napatan period – the time of Kushite rule over Egypt (ca. 750–664 BCE). The two funerary temples and pyramid Ku. 1 clearly dated to the 4th century BCE, likely representing an attempted return to the burial site of what were by that time illustrious ancestors. None of these 4th century structures had been finished, however – clearly this was a turbulent time in the political history of Kush, as suggested by the move of the royal burials to Meroe in the early 3rd century BCE, and the king’s successor had not granted him the honour of a royal burial. The town wall, some 130 metres long (although only preserved along its river-facing side), was certainly built during the Medieval (Christian) Period, sometime between the 6th and 10th century CE, and the rock-cut well was likely associated with it. Thus, although our excavation did succeed in relocating Reisner’s structures, we did not find any evidence of a Napatan royal city – quite the contrary.

Our subsequent work at the site has focused on documentation, preservation of structures, and discussions with people in El-Kurru village about heritage. The project’s conservator, Suzanne Davis, has also worked with conservation colleagues and members of the local community to clean, protect, and document a corpus of ancient graffiti found in the larger funerary temple.²⁰

Our heritage work, sometimes called ‘community archaeology’,²¹ has resulted in a plan for us to build a community heritage centre – a project that many in the village are excited about, both because it will give them an opportunity to show visitors something about their local culture and history, and because it will provide some longer term local employment (once we have located funding to build the centre itself).

It was our heritage work, and the process of continuing to build collaborative and trusting relationships with people in El-Kurru village, that finally led us to learning more about El-Kurru during the Twenty-fifth Dynasty. One day in 2018, a friend from El-Kurru walked into our dig house with two bulging plastic shopping bags and asked us to look and tell him what I could about what was inside. The objects were incredible in the context of the general lack of finds in our excavations: three whole ceramic vessels, one faience plaque,

19 Preliminary reports in Sudan & Nubia: Emberling and Dann 2013; Emberling et al. 2015; Dann and Emberling 2016. Some of this early work was also depicted in a 2014 film, ‘Rise of the Black Pharaohs’ (National Geographic / PBS).

20 This material was the subject of a 2019–20 exhibit at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, with a catalogue (Emberling and Davis 2019) and website: <https://exhibitions.kelsey.isa.umich.edu/graffiti-el-kurru/> (consulted July 1, 2020).

21 See Humphris et al. in press.

and a scarab. They were mostly complete, clearly from burials, but our friend was not given permission to say exactly where they came from.

Naturally, finding out more about the context of these finds was among our top priorities. Eventually, we learned that the scarab had come from an area outside a house in the village and that the rest of the objects had come from one or more burials inside the courtyard of a nearby house. The burials contained bones, and the homeowner had conveyed to our friend that he thought there were at least five burials in the courtyard.

The family whose house contained the burials was reluctant to allow us to visit the burials or to excavate them in part because they were concerned (as we heard) that we or Sudan's antiquities service (known as the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, or NCAM) would seize the house and evict them. In fact, Sudan's 1999 antiquities law allows wide discretion to the antiquities department, and owners who recover antiquities on their property are entitled to compensation for the objects and in most cases are not disturbed further. But, as we found out later, the family that owned the property had widely scattered members and it was not a simple matter to generate a consensus about allowing us to excavate the burials. Eventually, we were able to arrange a deal in which the location of the house would be pointed out to us as we left the village for the last time at the end of the 2018 season (located generally on fig. 4), with the understanding that the family would continue to discuss the issue in the coming year. As it has happened, however, there has been no consensus in the family about allowing us to excavate and document the graves either in 2019 or so far in 2020 (as we write). We are therefore left only with the testimony of the objects.

It turns out that the recently discovered objects were found about 800 metres northeast (upstream) from the centre of the royal



FIG. 4: Satellite photo of El-Kurru showing cemetery, modern village, and recently discovered Napatan burials.

cemetery (Piankhy's tomb, Ku. 17), near the modern Muslim cemetery, and far from the areas in which we had been looking for Napatan settlement or non-royal burials. In fact, Reisner had excavated nine burials at a distance from the royal cemetery. Ku. 51–55 were simple tombs of subsidiary queens that contained some of the finest objects recovered in the excavation. They were relatively close to the main cemetery, about 175 metres to the north of Piankhy's tomb. Ku. 61–62 were larger and more elaborate burials, one (Ku. 61) preserving traces of wall paint in the burial chamber, located about 250 metres northeast. Reisner and Dunham interpreted them as queens' tombs.²² Ku. 71–72 were considerably smaller tombs, one of which (Ku. 72) contained an abundance of precious objects. They were located about 425 metres northeast of Piankhy's tomb in the same direction, and were also tentatively understood as queens' tombs.

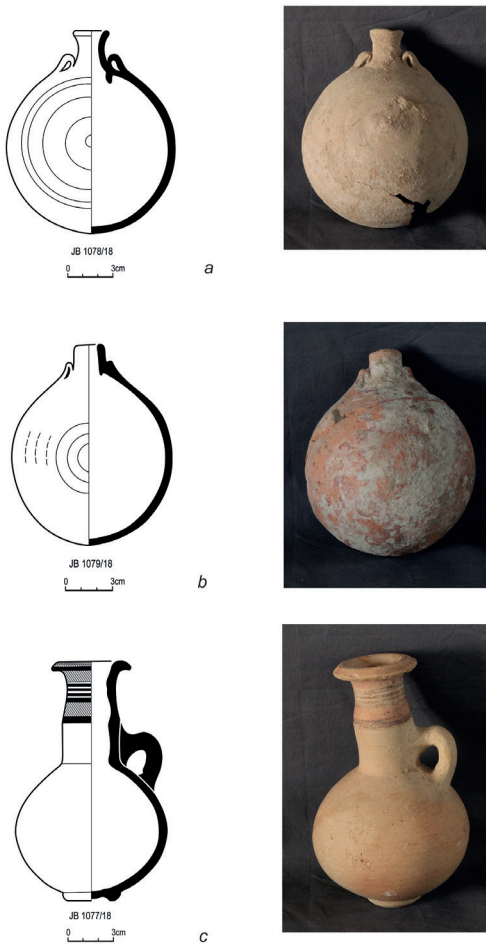


FIG. 5: Ceramic vessels found in El-Kurru village in 2018. Note that the project had a very limited time to examine and document these objects.

a. Ceramic flask with handles; wheel-made body. Middle Napatan period (ca. 750–650 BCE). Rim diameter 2.3 cm; diameter at largest point of body 11.1 cm. (Drawing: Dobiesława Bagińska; Photograph: Jack Cheng.)

b. Ceramic flask with squished handles; wheel-made body. Middle Napatan period (ca. 750–650 BCE). Rim diameter 2.0 cm; diameter at largest point of body 10.4 cm; height 13.1 cm (Drawing: Dobiesława Bagińska; Photograph: Jack Cheng.)

c. Ceramic juglet with bichrome paint. Middle Napatan period (ca. 750–650 BCE). Rim diameter 5.4 cm; diameter at largest point of body 10.3 cm; height 13.3 cm. (Drawing: Dobiesława Bagińska; Photograph: Jack Cheng.)

22 Dunham 1950: 97–100.

The recently discovered objects show clear parallels to objects found in nearby sites in contexts of Middle Napatan (Twenty-fifth Dynasty) date. Two of the ceramic vessels are pilgrim flasks (fig. 5a, b), with buff to reddish paste, with clear parallels in previously excavated royal tombs at El-Kurru as well as in numerous other sites in Kush.²³ A particular concentration of similar flasks was excavated by Reisner in Ku. 72, near the reported location of these new finds. These jars are made of marl clay; normally the assumption is that these vessels would have been made in Egypt, but provenience or workshop studies of Napatan pottery that would clarify this question have not been systematically done. The third vessel (fig. 5c) is a Phoenician bichrome painted jug with a ring base and globular body, almost certainly imported from the northern Levant and dating to the 8th century BCE.²⁴ Similar vessels were found in the Sanam cemetery.²⁵

In addition to the three ceramic vessels, the objects included a faience amulet and a scarab. The amulet has broad parallels with objects found in nearby sites, but no closely similar objects have been published. In particular, abundant finely made faience plaques and amulets were found in the queens' burials at El-Kurru,²⁶ and abundant less fine faience objects were also found in nonroyal burials at Sanam.²⁷ The El-Kurru amulet itself depicts a lion lying under a palm tree with what appears to be a schematic winged disk on the right side of its convex surface (fig. 6). Its flat surface is decorated with geometric designs – running spirals around a central diamond. The figural images are not particularly common in the iconography of the Napatan heartland, although a plaque from Sanam shows some similarities.²⁸ It is clear that there was a local faience industry in the Napatan region, as attested by finds of moulds in and around the temple of Amun built by Taharqo at Sanam,²⁹ and it seems reasonable to assume that this plaque would have been made in the region of Napata.

The scarab, found separately from the other objects but presumably also from a contemporary nearby grave, is made of glazed steatite (fig. 7). Its flat surface, broken around the edges, depicts a horse, chariot, and rider, with a cartouche reading 'Menkheperre' above. The horse is rendered with a disproportionately large head and short legs. It does not appear that the horse had a headdress, although there is a broken area above, disconnected from its head, that has the form of a feather. The rider does not appear to have a crown

23 Kilroe 2019; to which add a single attestation at Meroe: Dunham 1963: 442–43, fig. 239 (fine orange-pink ware flask, tomb S 207, dated to mid-7th century BCE).

24 E.g. Bikai 1978; Lehmann 1998.

25 Griffith 1923, pl. XVII, type VIb.

26 Dunham 1950.

27 Griffith 1923.

28 Griffith 1923, pl. LIII, 10 (a ram-headed lion).

29 Griffith 1922: 87–88, pl. XVII; Howley 2018.



FIG. 6

FIG. 6: Faience amulet found in El-Kurru village in 2018. Length 4.2 cm. (Drawings and photographs: Jack Cheng.)

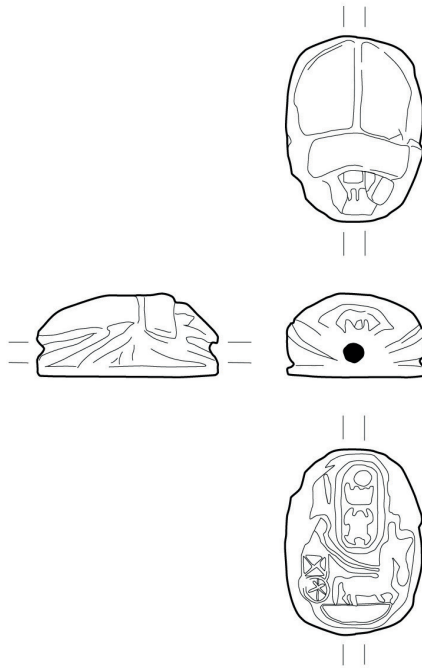


FIG. 7

FIG. 7: Glazed steatite scarab found in El-Kurru village in 2018. Length 2.0 cm. (Drawings and photographs: Jack Cheng.)

or weapon. The chariot is represented by an X-in-box, with a 6-spoked wheel beneath it. The basket below can be read ‘neb’, meaning ‘lord’.

The throne name Menkheperre was first used by the Egyptian king Thutmose III, but was also taken by a number of later kings, presumably in deference to the successful conquests of its first user. For scarabs inscribed with this name, one question is whether they were heirlooms, or whether they were made in a later period. It is clear that many scarabs with this name were produced during the Twenty-fifth Dynasty,³⁰ perhaps in Egypt and perhaps also locally in Kush (although there is no clear evidence of local production of scarabs).

Scarabs with horses and chariots are normally dated to the New Kingdom,³¹ although many (like the scarab published here) do not have clear archaeological context. Horses and chariots were commonly depicted in Kushite art of this period, however, as on the walls of the Amun Temple at Barkal³² and the Amun Temple of Taharqo at Sanam.³³ They are less often represented on Kushite scarabs, but a lapis lazuli amulet found in the cemetery of Sanam³⁴ illustrates that horses were also represented in non-royal contexts. There is no evidence for Egyptian occupation at El-Kurru, so, assuming its findspot has been correctly reported, it would have been an heirloom in a Napatan context.

These five objects, then, are generally consistent with a date during the Kushite rule over Egypt, when ideas and objects from the Egyptian world and beyond reached Kush, and Kushites selectively developed and used them for their own purposes. The location of the finds will point the way to the next archaeological project to work in El-Kurru, which may eventually locate and be able to excavate burials and perhaps even remains of ancient settlement in this newly promising area. At the end of our very short opportunity to examine and document the objects, we returned them to the family who had found them.

One final point. The objects we present here are the first new evidence for the Twenty-fifth Dynasty occupation of El-Kurru since Reisner’s excavation in 1919. The fact that we were shown them despite the risk that the family perceived to their home shows one of the many reasons for archaeological projects to work closely with local communities. The fact that we have not (yet) been allowed inside the house to inspect or excavate them shows that we still have further to go to reach our goals of full local collaboration. ✎

30 Jaeger 1982: 246–52; Lohwasser 2014.

31 E.g. Jaeger 1982: 92, #III, 215.

32 Dunham 190, pl. L.

33 Griffith 1922, pl. XXIV.

34 Griffith 1923, pl. LVI, 14.

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