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Life, rebirth and a rare goddess.
A study based on a decorative bowl from the cemetery of Kedurma

1. Introduction

Kedurma is a Meroitic townsite located at the northern end of the Third Cataract Region, about 9 km north of the Kajabar rapids (Fig.1). The site has long been known as an important Meroitic center with elite residences, industrial areas, residential quarters, and a large cemetery. However, it has been little explored. Recent excavations by the University of Khartoum have brought to light various aspects of Meroitic afterlife beliefs and practices. So far, 50 graves have been excavated, showing different types of typical Meroitic tombs with a variety of materials found therein.

Most of the excavated graves have a subterranean base from which a sloping ramp led down to a burial chamber oriented east-west and coaxial with the access path. The entrance to the chambers was bricked up or closed with stone slabs and mud bricks. The body was buried lying on its back in an east-west direction, with the head pointing upwards, north or south. At least 35 of the graves contained between 2 and 5 bodies.

The materials found within the excavated graves include pottery or artefacts made of metal, wood, ivory, leather, and bones. Objects like iron ankles, rings, arrow heads, belt pieces, kohl pots and sticks were detected. This material provided insights into the life and status of some people of the Kedurma community.

The present study attempts to investigate the meaning of religious motifs on a Meroitic bowl discovered during the 2021 excavation season in the Kedurma cemetery (KDRM003).[1] The themes
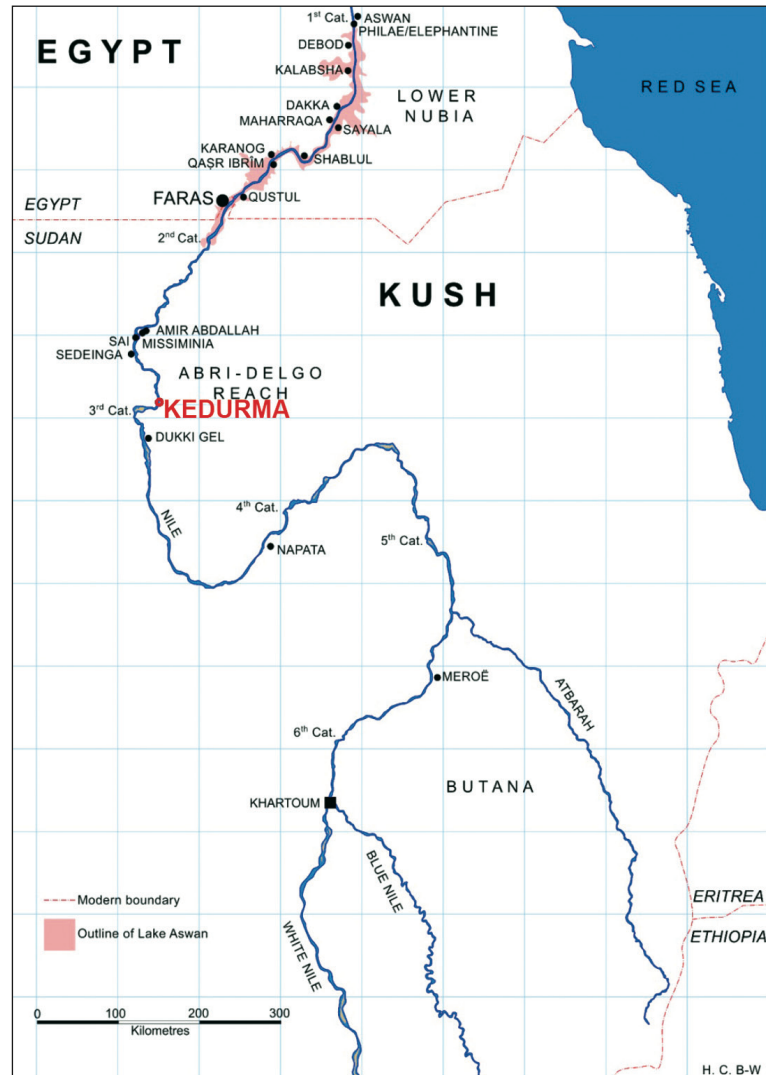
depicted on the bowl may shed light on the status of the owner as an important figure in the community.

In addition to this bowl, the excavations yielded a wide range of complete and fragmentary pottery.

Fig. 1: The geographical location of Kedurma (modified after Bishop-Wright 2022, 89).

Thirty-nine vessels were collected from the tombs, including small cups, bowls, beakers and large jars.

Preliminary examination of the collected pottery revealed eight stylistic groups, distinguishable by manufacture and general characteristics. Among them were imported pottery and fine ware. The group to which the vessel discussed belongs is the wheel-made fine ware group, consisting mainly of Adams' family M "fine eggshell ware" and the ordinary red ware of group N.I (Adams 1986, 435-440).

There ceramics, mostly made on the potter's wheel with burnished or polished surfaces, represent only a fraction of the total Meroitic ceramic complex. The "Meroitic fine ware" or "eggshell ware," consists of delicate, thin-walled bowls, beakers, and cups while the "Meroitic ordinary ware" consists of larger vessels in a variety of shapes and fabrics (Adams 1986, 50).

W.Y. Adams classified and analyzed this type of pottery in his major work on Meroitic pottery (Adams 1964; 1986), based largely on data collected from Lower Nubian sites of the Meroitic, X-Group, and Christian periods. Most of the materials collected were from cemeteries rather than settlement sites (Adams 1964, 63-65).

Adams assigned this group to the Late Meroitic phase in both Lower and Upper Nubia. He believed that this type of pottery was produced primarily in Lower Nubian centers and then transported south through trade (Adams 1973, 232; Adams 1986, 14). On the other hand, a preliminary analysis of eggshell pottery from Meroe suggests that this pottery has little in common with that from Lower Nubia and therefore may have been produced at Meroe (Bradley 1984, 206).

Recent investigations at numerous Meroitic sites in both Upper and Lower Nubia have confirmed that this pottery was made from different fabrics in both regions. The discovery of associated kilns at the island of Meroe sites such as Meroe (Shinnie and Anderson 2004, 73-79), Musawwarat es-Sufra (Edwards 1999, 40), Muweis (Baud 2008, 53), El Hassa (Lenoble and Rondot 2003, 106), and Hamadab (Wolf e. a. 2014, 229) confirmed the local production of this type of pottery (David 2018; 2019; Nowotnick 2022, 87). Meanwhile, this group, together with its decoration by wavy lines, stamped and painted floral motifs, is placed in the first decades of the 1st century AD as the result of a transfer of knowledge from the Roman Empire to the Meroitic Kingdom (David 2019, 879–880). Meroitic potters integrated various techniques and forms into their own repertoire and directly adapted the method of stamp decoration to their own iconography, where the light surface of the

vessels became an important medium for the development of religious themes influenced by Pharaonic, Ptolemaic, and Roman Egyptian liturgy, as well as local features in the iconography (David 2019, 880).

It has been noted that the main motifs in the decoration of this group reflect religious beliefs that are predominantly Egyptian in origin. The specific religious iconography painted or stamped on the Meroitic ceramics shows no regional preference and follows canonical models. The iconography used on the vessels is also very similar to that used in other media such as reliefs in funerary chapels and temples, which follow a common and structured decorative program established by religious authorities (David 2019, 880). In this case, fine ceramics would have participated in the dissemination of archaizing cultural tendencies that are clearly expressed in architecture and Meroitic writing (Török 1997, 463–467). However, the decorated cup which is in the focus of this paper combines canonical motifs with a hitherto singular and pure Meroitic depiction of a goddess.

2. Research context

The tomb in which the vessel was found is KDRM18, which is a robbed small foot-shaped tomb characteristic of early Meroitic tomb types in Lower Nubia (cf. Obłuski 2008; Näser 1999; Fernandez 1980; Sakamoto 2014). It consists of a 1.80 m long and 0.80 m wide slope ending in a ca. 0.60 m wide and maximum 0.90 m long cave-like burial chamber. In contrast to the other graves in the cemetery, the entrance was on the west side (Fig. 2).

The burial chamber was filled with sand as a result of reopening or looting (Fig. 3). The remains of an adult, possibly female, were recovered in an elongated position with the head facing west. The vessel in question was recovered from inside the burial chamber in a disturbed position.

3. The description of the vessel

3.1. Form

The vessel is made of kaolinitic clay. It is a bowl with 14 cm diameter and 0.1–0.2 cm thickness. It is well fired and has a light color. Both surfaces of the vessel were polished and smoothed. Outside it is slipped with a light color, inside with reddish-brown. The painted decoration outside consist of red black outlines and light gray for tail and dress (Figs. 4, 5).

Fig. 2: The tomb KDRM 18 (© Y. Tai Allah).

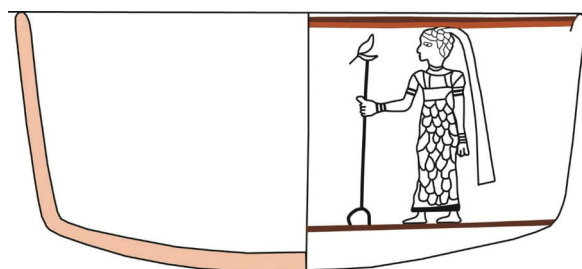Fig. 3: KDRM 18 with the bowl in its context (© Y. Tai Allah).

Fig. 4: The decorated bowl of Kedurma (© M. Bashir).

Fig. 5: The depictions of the bowl (photo processing: S. Poudroux, SFDAS, 2020, drawing: M. Hayati).

3.2. Decoration

The motifs discussed in this article are lotus flower, *ankh* (sign of life), and *was*-scepter. The general structure and appearance of the decoration on the bowl is formed by a Meroitic female repeated four times around the surface of the vessel; each figure standing in front of an open lotus flower with lotus buds. The painting is done in red and black colors on a light surface. The female is depicted in the same pose with a *was*-scepter ending with the head of an animal in her right hand, twice holding an *ankh* in her left hand. The face is shown in profile with the eye open.

Figure a) has an empty and closed left hand and holds a *was*-scepter in her right hand. The scepter is touching the ground.

Figure b) has a left hand holding an *ankh* and her right hand grasps a *was*-scepter that does not touch the ground.

Figure c) holds an *ankh* in her left and a *was*-scepter in her right hand. The scepter is touching the ground.

Figure d) has an empty and closed left hand and her right hand holds another kind of *was*-scepter that touches the ground.

In the four representations, in addition to her clothes, the female also wears a headdress with a long tail that almost reaches the ground (Fig. 5). It is suspected that the female figure is possibly to be connected with the owner of the grave.

4. Discussion

To facilitate study and detail of the figures, I will discuss them in three parts. The first contains details

of the dresses, the second deals with the headdress and tail, and the third with the associated symbols.

4.1. Dresses

Clothing, considered a major element of Meroitic art, can provide important information about the status of the person and art in general. Numerous iconographic documents show different people in different costumes. These depictions, mostly commissioned by the royal family, and members of the nobility, are found in carved or painted scenes decorating temples, funerary chapels and fine ceramics (Yvanez and Wozniak 2019, 9). They also appear on sculptures, private stelae, decorated bronze objects and jewellery. They are particularly useful in documenting the various garments worn by deities, member of the royal house and the elite and their arrangement in particular outfits, as well as the components of royal ceremonial dress for which we know of no surviving fabrics (Yvanez 2018, 89). The information on non-royal Meroitic women, however, is far from complete. This is mainly because there are few excavated non-royal tombs with images of non-royal women. While there are very few visual representations of women and even less inscriptional evidence, we do have some evidence of clothing and jewellery from tombs of different periods (Haynes and Santini-Ritt 2012, 170).

The vessel under investigation depicts a female in four different forms, as follows;

Figure a: She is equipped with a plain headdress showing curly hair, with a long, broad tail reaching almost to the ground. The face is shown in profile and is characterized by a wide open eye. The upper part of her garment is a bustier with a strap over both shoulders and a collar in three representations

a, c and d. The same type of dress was depicted in the walls of the temples of Musawwarat es-Sufra (Hintze 1978, 95–96).

She wears two bracelets on her wrists and two bracelets on her upper arms. She is clad in a long garment that reaches from below her armpits to her feet. The dress is embroidered as a checkerboard or maybe with a scale-like pattern.

In her right hand she carries the *was*-scepter, which ends with the head of an animal, possibly a Sethian animal. The stick is fixed on the ground and directed to the lotus flower. The left hand is empty and closed.

Figure b: The second figure likewise wears the headdress with a long broad tail that reaches almost to the ground. The upper part of the body is naked. The female's robe consists of a long skirt decorated with embracing wings of a falcon which are draped around the lower body and are crossed below the chest.

The same clothing was depicted on Meroitic temple walls as well as on royal and funerary stelae. Such iconography has been associated with some goddesses such as Mut (cf. Lohwasser 2016, 123–125) as well as the goddess Isis in the Lion temple at Naga and in the Great Enclosure at Musawwarat es-Sufra (Hintze1978, 95–96). Moreover, the goddesses Satis and Mut wear the same dress in the similar scenes depicted on columns 7, 8 and 9 in front of the Central Temple in the Great Enclosure (Wenig 2001, 82). Furthermore, Queen Amanitore is depicted in the same dress on the façade of the Lion temple in Naga (Wildung and Kroeper 2016).

In the center of the dress of our figure is placed a cross or a kind of an *ankh* sign. She also wears a tassel-trimmed cord or necklace at the nape of her neck and holds another *ankh* sign in her left hand, which is depicted with two loops in place of the upper and lower arms. In her second hand she carries a *was*-scepter with an open fork base topped with the head of same animal; she raises the staff from the ground toward the lotus flower.

Figure c: The female is shown with her face carefully painted and her eye open. The details of her clothing are as follows:

To her plain headdress with curly hair is affixed a long, broad tail reaching almost to the ground. The upper part of her garment is a bustier with a strap over both shoulders and a collar. Around the body she wears a long garment that reaches from below the armpits to the ankles.

The dress is embroidered with squares or crossed ribs. She wears nothing on her wrist. In her right hand she holds the scepter, which ends in an open

fork and is topped with the head of an animal. The scepter is fixed to the ground and points to one of the alternating open lotus flowers and lotus buds in front of her. In her left hand the female holds an *ankh* depicted in geometric style, the so-called ribbed or feathered *ankh*-signs, which have a spread base but are provided with semicircular heads (cf. Griffith 1926, Pl. XLV-12).

Figure d: The female wears the plain headdress, showing curled hair and a broad and thick long tail that hangs down almost to the ground. The dress is similar to figure c. As that of figure c, the upper dress is a bustier with a strap over both shoulders and a collar. She wears two bracelets on her upper arms and two more on her wrists. Her left hand is empty and closed. In her right hand she carries a flower scepter or a papyrus sceptre with an open fork at the base and a cord. The scepter is quite different from the others; it touches the ground and is pointed at the lotus flower. The female's dress in this depiction ends with a small step at the bottom of her left foot.

In summary, the female on this vessel wears three different garments in her four depictions, most of which are known from depictions of Meroitic goddesses. In the first figure, she wears a long dress decorated with small feathers that she wraps around her body below the armpits and that resembles the dresses of the goddesses depicted on the outer walls of the Lion Temple at Musawwarat es-Sufra (Hintze1978, 95–96). The other dresses also resemble the garments of goddesses and the queen's dresses.

The figure (b) shows the female in a dress covered with wings and feathers of a vulture. This is also another costume of Meroitic queens and goddesses (cf. Lohwasser and Phillips 2020, 1018; Lohwasser 2016, 123–125). The falcon was a sacred animal of the gods Horus and Osiris, while the use of falcon or vulture dress is clearly related to the worship of Isis in Lower Nubia. Most iconographic and epigraphic evidence from the 1st to 3rd centuries AD associates it with her cult and her priests (Pompei 2015, 566–68).

4.2. THE HEAD DRESS AND THE TAIL

Headdresses in general are abundantly known from representations of royal and divine figures in the ancient civilisations of the entire Nile Valley. The headdress of Kushite women consists of different types and components, possibly reflecting the different status of royal women (Lohwasser 2001, 64). The headdress with tail on the vessel under discussion look similar in all representation of the figure; it is plain and long, although in the three figures a, c and d curly hair is shown together with the tail.

Only royal women of higher rank were entitled to wear crowns and the uraeus; the Kushite headdress with tail, as seen here, is attested for royal women of lower rank (Lohwasser 2001, 64; Török 1995, 116). The representations of the female figure in question here show a headdress in a form similar to Meroitic goddesses and queens depicted in temples and chapels in the Meroe region. The figure's natural hair is curled, visualized with a pattern of small rectangles formed by crossing lines.

The same depiction of curled hair is also found on a depiction of a Meroitic queen or prince on a sandstone block found in room C in palace 750S in Meroe (Fig. 6) as well as at heads of sandstone statutes of royal persons found at Meroe (Fig. 7).

Particularly striking in all four representations on the bowl is the long tail of hair that reaches from the middle of the head to the ground. An interesting range of parallels exist for this headdress. The same was used on the stele of Prince Arikankharor (Worcester Art Museum 192.145), where the little goddess Talakh wears a very similar headdress (Fig. 8). The other very similar headdress is that of the goddess, presumably Mut, on the stela of Amanikhabale in Khartoum (SNM 522), but here the tail is combined with a crown (Fig. 9). Both representation are dated to the 1st century AD, the same period as the site of Kedurma.

Fig. 6: Sandstone block with relief depicting a queen or a princess (after Grzymski and Grzymska 2008, 50, pl. XIX).

Fig. 8: Stele of Prince Arikankharor, (Worcester Art Museum 192.145, after Yellin 2021, 7, fig. 31.3).

Fig. 7: Head of sandstone statute from Meroe (after Näser 2004, 269, Fig. 134).

Fig. 9: Stele of Amanikhabale (Sudan National Museum SNM 522, after Yellin 2021, 7, fig. 31.3).

The same iconography arrears on a pair of gold and enamel ear studs found on the debris of the pyramid Beg. W. 127 (Fig. 10), as well as of the goddesses seated on a throne on a small silver ring from Meroe, Beg. N. 16, (Fig. 11). On both, the Double Crown alludes to the goddess Mut.

This kind of headdress is to be distinguished from the band of a diadem or crown, which is tied at the back of the head, both ends of which are visible at the nape of the neck. This band is seen in pictures of both kings and queens and in some cases also on goddesses (Török 1987, 6).

In summary, the above mentioned depictions show similar patterns of headgear that continued to be used from the 1st century BC to the 3rd century AD. It can therefore be surmised that the adaptation of the same pattern of headdress with its meticulous details on these different representations could shed light on the interrelationships of artistic traditions and provide clues to pronounced stylistic and qualitative similarities (cf. Wenig 1978, 200).

4.3. SYMBOLS:

4.3.1. *was*-SCEPTER

The Egyptian *was*-scepter is probably one of the most common and important royal symbols in Kush and ancient Egypt. It occurs almost as frequently as the well-known *ankh*. Both symbols are closely associated with the most important rituals, mostly by the gods and many of the goddesses of the ancient state on the Nile (Lobban and Sprague 1997, 14). The *was*-scepter usually appears with a stylized animal head at the tip of a long, straight staff with a forked end and was always used as a symbol of power or dominance (Allen 2014, 579). Usually, the staff is considered simply a symbol of the political and religious power originally associated with Thebes or a link to an animal god such as Seth or Khnum. In later usage, it was a symbol of control over the power of chaos represented by Seth (Lobban and Sprague 1997). However, two types of scepters are represented on the vessel discussed here.

The one depicted with figures a, b, and c forms a *was*-scepter with an open fork base topped with the head of an animal, probably a Sethian animal; the staff raised from the ground toward the lotus flower.

The scepter in figure d might end with a blossom. It is probably a stylized lotus flower, or it could be a *wadj*-scepter ending in a papyrus flower at the top. The scepter here touches the ground and is directed towards the lotus flower.
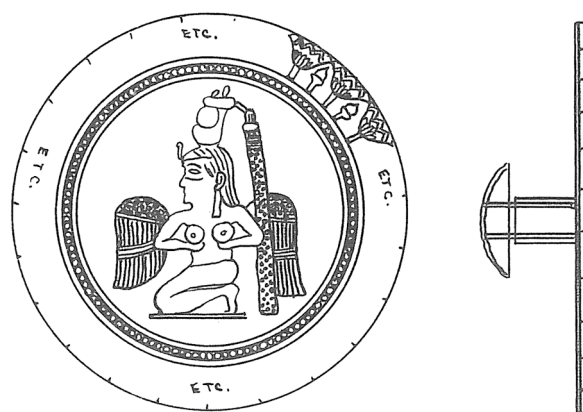

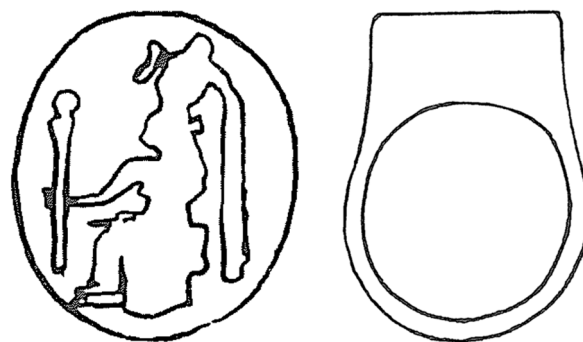Fig. 10: Ear stud from Meroe, Beg. W. 127 (after Dunham 1963, 170, Fig. 122).

Fig. 11: Bezel ring with seated goddesses from Meroe, Beg. N. 16 (after Dunham 1957, 141 fig. 92).

4.3.2. *Ankh* SIGN

The *ankh* sign is the connotation of life, rebirth, eternity, and continued provision for the deceased in the afterlife in the Egyptian and Kushite kingdoms (Elhassan 2004, 33; Neeteson 2021, 1). As a symbol of power, it was used in Egyptian, Napatan, and Meroitic temple walls, scenes in Meroitic funerary chapels, stelae, and elsewhere (Dunham, 1955, 14; 1957, 153, 164, 244; 1963, 319, 320; Garstang et al. 1911, PI. X-4; Shinnie and Bradley 1980, 175). The *ankh* in the hand hanging behind the back of the female figures on the bowl from Kedurma clearly characterizes her as a goddess.

Like the lotus flower, the *ankh* sign appears repeatedly in the decoration of Meroitic pottery from most Meroitic sites, particularly Meroe (Garstang et al. 1911; Shinnie and Bradley 1980), Wad Ban Naga (Vercoutter 1962), Karanog (Woolley and Maclver 1910), Qustul and Ballana (Williams 1991), and Faras (Griffith 1926). It usually appears in different shapes. Sometimes the base of the *ankh* sign is depicted as a thin wavy line, as if it were part of a vine, or more rarely drawn as part of a plant leaf. Most of the

painted forms of the *ankh* sign on Meroitic pottery are stylized and typical of Meroitic Kush. The base was sometimes splayed and it was generally an out-line or silhouette (Elhassan 2004, 36). On the vessel studied, the *ankh* sign is drawn in simple lines.

4.3.3. LOTUS FLOWER

The lotus flower was associated with the origin of life in the ancient Egyptian mythology. Its sacred character derived from its watery habitat, as water is an archaic element (Elhassan 2004, 26). It represents a symbol of life and rebirth. Therefore, it played an important role in the cult of the dead.

The lotus flower was intensively depicted in the Kushite religious architecture and paintings. It occurs repeatedly as an amulet in Kushite periods (Shinnie and Bradley 1980, 168, fig. 60), appeared in different scenes on the chapel walls of the royal tombs at Meroe and Barkal (Chapman and Dunham 1952), in the palaces and temples of Meroe, Naga, and Wad Ban Naga (Hakem 1988, 322; Wenig 1978, 100; Vercoutter 1962, 263–278).

In Meroitic pottery, the lotus seems to be the most common symbol, found singly or in conjunction with other religious motifs. The depiction of the lotus ranges from stylized simple forms to elaborate and composite forms. It occurs repeatedly on pottery from most Meroitic sites, notably Karanog (Woolley and MacIver 1910), Qustul and Ballana (Williams 1991), Faras (Griffith 1924), Meroe (Garstang et al. 1911; Shinnie and Bradley 1980), Wad Ban Naga (Vercoutter 1962), Abu Erteila (Fantusati et al. 2014, 750), and Barkal (Bakowska 2015). On the vessel discussed here, the lotus was depicted in an elaborate form as an open flower with buds on both sides connected to the flower on the petiole. This depiction is close to Egyptian models (Adams 1986, 278, fig. 130, m-4 to m-26).

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Certain motifs on Meroitic painted and stamped pottery are known from the Meroitic religion, which was partly adopted from Egyptian religion. In the first decades of the 1st century AD Meroitic potters used all the possibilities of the wheel to form new shapes borrowed from Egyptian and Graeco-Roman world as well as techniques like stamp decoration (David 2019, 879–880). Therefore, the motifs functioned not only as decorative elements but also as religious symbols with meaning (Elhassan 2004, 5). The Meroitic pottery collections studied in Lower

and Upper Nubian sites show that the Meroites used many motifs represented by symbols such as the lotus flower, the *ankh* sign, the *sa*-knot as well as the offering-table, the Udjat-eye, the altar, the ox, the gazelle, the leopard, the frog, the sun disk, the scorpion, the crocodile, the serpent, the winged or wingless Uraeus, and the vulture with or without outstretched wings (Elhassan 2004, 22). On the stamped pottery, motifs of Egyptian origin are limited to simple repetitive forms of the uraeus snake, the *ankh*, the lotus flower, the frog, the offering-table, and the *sa*-knot (Elhassan 2004, 22). The bowl under study combines specific motifs of recreation, life and power which are common on Meroitic pottery with the rare presentation of a goddess with a long hairtail.

Furthermore, the iconography of this vessel is valuable in the case that the bowl was made as grave good or for use during life ending up in a tomb. The information could possibly establish a connection between the female goddess and the tomb owner, who might have been a priestess or servant of the goddess. The appearance of the symbols of *ankh*, lotus flower, and *was*-scepter in this burial context links them to the donation of eternal life and corresponds to the role of the goddess in the cult of the dead. It is evident that these symbols were used in the context of libations. The images of libations with *ankh* symbols in the temple reliefs and on papyri of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period symbolise the "donation of life" to a person to whom the ritual was addressed (Malykh 2018, 63). Again, this arrangement and illumination shows that the Meroites seem to have well understood the association with the concepts of creation, birth, life and rebirth. This association was surely intended to give the motif a deeper religious meaning.

In summary, the general appearance of the goddess on the bowl shows her in a tight-fitting 'goddess' dress with elaborately curled hair and a long tail. This could be Isis in local form or another indigenous goddess. Isis is well known in the Meroitic Kingdom, especially in its northern part through priestly titles and other inscriptional evidence, such as that of Qasr Ibrim, Doukki Gel, (Kuckertz 2019, 114). Sai, Sedeinga (Rilly and Francigny 2012, 64), and Kedurma (Interim Report 2023). Among the titles conferred on members of the family of the deceased on a stela found at Kedurma, those of some important officials such as governor (xrpxe), specialised priest (ateqi) or royal scribe (qorene) are mentioned. The latter function is generally associated with the temple of Isis at Philae (Bashir and Rilly 2023 forthcoming).

The Meroitic priesthood adapted the cult of Isis to local needs and specified the goddess's relations

to the other deities of the Kushite pantheon (Baldi 2016, 106). Moreover, libations and offerings among the grave goods indicate the performance of rituals associated with her (Baldi 2014, 77–80), as do scenes inscribed on offering tables, which are common in royal, elite and even poorer tombs (Yellin 1995, 2881–84).

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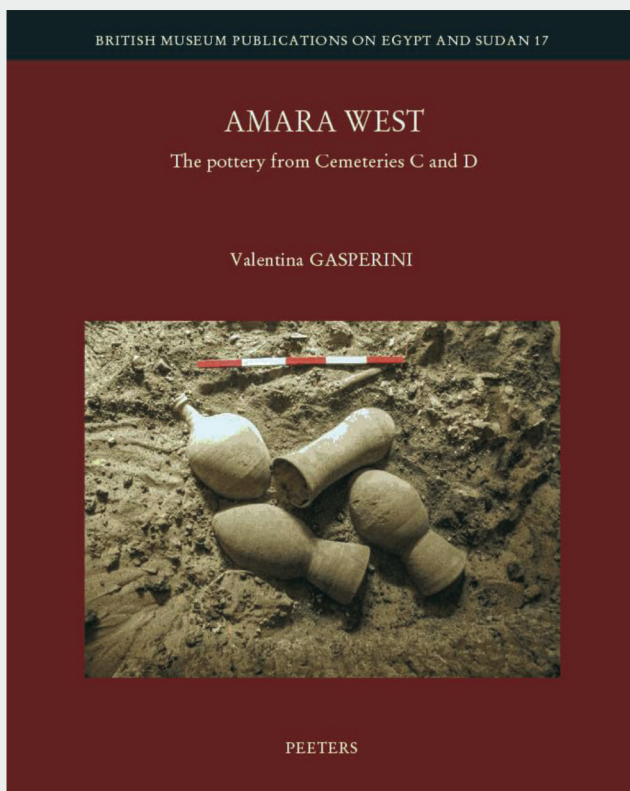
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Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag wird die Bedeutung religiöser Motive auf einer meroitischen Schale untersucht, die während der Grabungssaison 2021 im Grab 18 des Friedhofs von Kedurma (KDRM003) im Nordsudan entdeckt wurde. Die aufgemalten Motive des untersuchten Gefäßes zeigen eine Frau zusammen mit den Symbolen der Lotosblume, des Anch-Zeichens und des Was-Zepters. Die Gruppe der symbolischen Motive auf dem untersuchten Gefäß weist auf eine sakrale Funktion hin. Das Anch symbolisiert das Leben, das Zepter die Herrschaft und die Lotusblume wird mit der Wiedergeburt von Osiris und der Erneuerung des Lebens in Verbindung gebracht. Außergewöhnlich ist jedoch die Darstellung einer Göttin mit einem langen Haarschwanz, für die es nur wenige Parallelen in der meroitischen Kunst gibt.

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AMARA WEST
The pottery from Cemeteries C and D

Valentina GASPERINI

PEETERS

Valentina Gasperini
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The two cemeteries of Amara West in Sudan, a town founded in around 1300 BC as a new centre for the colonial pharaonic administration of Kush (Upper Nubia), were excavated by the British Museum's Amara West Research Project between 2009 and 2016. This book focused on the ceramic vessels placed in the burials, between c. 1300 BC and the 8th century BC. The comprehensive analyses of the pottery, accompanied by a full catalogue, provides insights into the role of ceramic vessels for funerary purposes, trade networks between Upper Nubia, Egypt and farther afield. The inclusion of Nubian hand-made vessels with some burials reflects aspects of cultural entanglement, and raises questions of identity and cultural affiliation, particularly in the transition between the period of pharaonic occupation and its aftermath. An introduction by Michaela Binder provides an orientation to the architecture and archaeology of the cemeteries.