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# AN X-GROUP GOBLET IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MÜNSTER<sup>1</sup>

In the Archaeological Museum of the University of Münster a small goblet with a ring base is listed under inv. no. 176. This type of goblet is commonly regarded as wine drinking vessel, typical for the X-Group period (ca. 350–600 AD) of Lower Nubia. The X-Group is an archaeological unit, established in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by George A. Reisner to describe the cultural sequence of the region. As transitional phase between two powerful empires, the Kingdom of Kush (ca. 900 BC–350 AD) and the Christian kingdoms at the Middle Nile (ca. 550–1500 AD), the X-Group is characterised by significant political, economic, and societal changes. As this is the only object from Late Antique Nubia in the collection at Münster, we will discuss its features and attempt to narrow down its relevance, former use, and the circumstances of its acquisition.

## DESCRIPTION

Material: Nile clay with red slip and painting. According to the terminology of Adams (Ceramic Industries): Ware R1, Form B 18, Style N.II.A. Height: 5.5–6.0 cm (incl. ring base), diameter max. 10.7 cm, diameter opening 8.8 cm, diameter ring base max. 6.0 cm, height of ring base 0.3 cm.

The wheel-made beaker has a slightly biconical shape with a wide opening and a low ring base.<sup>2</sup> The entire vessel tilted slightly to one side, probably during drying in the course of manufacture, resulting in a height difference of 0.5 cm. The round and slightly inverted rim is thus not horizontal. Two clearly deepened grooves can be seen at the point of maximum diameter. The beaker is smoothed and the upper two thirds are covered with a red coating, which reaches to just below the grooves on the lower part of the

bowl, and to half of the belly on the higher part of it. Additionally, it is decorated by a simple painting: On two opposite sides a broader white stroke is bordered by two narrower black vertical lines, on the other two opposite sides there are two simple black lines. All lines are executed with a wide brush from the mouth of the vessel to below the bend of the belly, each starting with a wider stroke and ending in a narrow point.

Fine wheel-turning grooves can be seen on the inner side, but the bottom is also lopsided in the interior. The ring base has a small bulge towards the outside, probably caused by the smoothing of the clay after it was removed from the potter's wheel.

The vessel is very well preserved, with only a small chipping on the inside below the mouth. Here the paste is visible, a reddish to pink fine clay.

## MORPHOLOGY

The form of this goblet is typical of the X-Group, though bowls with a ring base are also frequently attested in previous Meroitic assemblages.<sup>3</sup> Bent conical goblets (class B18)<sup>4</sup> first came to Nubia as imports from Upper Egypt, and were subsequently copied locally. Local copies are only known from the X-Group period and not from later times. Since the early goblets of this type produced in Lower Nubia tend to be rather flat and squat, and later become progressively taller and slimmer, the vessel in the Archaeological Museum can be dated to the early X-Group.<sup>5</sup> In addition, specimens from northern Upper Nubia are larger with a height of 11–14 cm than those from Lower Nubia, whose average height is 6–9 cm.<sup>6</sup> Our vessel, which is about 6 cm high, therefore most likely originates from Lower Nubia.

This is also made plausible by the possible place of purchase (see below).

1 This article is a revised version of my contribution published as „Eine Weinschale aus Nubien im Archäologischen Museum der Universität Münster“, in: F. Feder / A. Lohwasser / G. Schenke (Hgg.), Sortieren – Edieren – Kreieren. Zwischen Handschriftenfunden und Universitätsalltag, Stephen L. Emmel zum 70. Geburtstag gewidmet. *Aegyptiaca Monasteriensia* 8, (2022), 363–371. I thank Ulrike Nowotnick very much for many helpful comments!

2 The terminology follows Jesse and Nowotnick, “Discussing pottery standards”.

3 Adams, Ceramic Industries I, 101.

4 Adams, Ceramic Industries I, 101 and Fig. 23 at p. 113.

5 The early and late variants of this vessel form can be clearly seen in the comparison in Adams, *Qasr Ibrim*, 242, pl. 9.

6 Sakamoto, „Christianizing“, 50.



Goblet in the Archaeological Museum of the University of Münster, Inv. No. 176 (photo: L. Hecht).

#### WARE AND DECORATION

Our drinking vessel is a typical representative of pottery ware R1, diagnostic for the X-Group period. The pottery group classified by Adams as “Ware R1” is frequently represented in Lower Nubia in the 4<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>7</sup> It consists of Nile clay, which takes on a red colour through firing, and shows strong similarities with Egyptian wares, especially vessels from Aswan. However, the designation R1 is applied to the typical wares of the X-Group between 450–650 AD and mainly to wheel-made pottery.<sup>8</sup> The earliest occurrence is around 400 AD, but evidence survives until after 700 AD. As a rule, vessels

of ware R1 are covered with a thin red slip that is not polished. It was most commonly used for goblets, bowls, cups and dishes as well as smaller bottles and jugs. Painting is found almost exclusively on footed goblets, and a groove running around the belly may also be regarded as decoration.

Adams classifies the decoration as “Classic X-Group Style” N.II.A, which in turn is well documented on goblets of ware R1.<sup>9</sup> Embellishments are only found on the outside of the vessel, and especially on the zone between rim and belly. Our vessel seems to be typical also in this respect, as Adams writes about the general decoration: “Clusters of fine incised grooves around the vessel waist are common on several forms, and occur with or without the conjunction of painted decoration”.<sup>10</sup> Although garlands schematically depicted as semicircles and other geometric patterns are also common, simple dots and lines – “distinctive above all by simplicity and lack of formality”<sup>11</sup> – are particularly frequent motifs. These strokes appear almost exclusively in black and white,<sup>12</sup> and in combination with one or more grooves around the belly of the vessel.<sup>13</sup>

The decoration on the vessel in Münster does not seem very careful, the strokes somewhat erratic and without correct execution across the grooves. The red slip also covers the body only irregularly, which may be due to the sagging of the goblet before firing. All in all, everything points to a fleetingly manufactured beaker that may have been mass-produced.

<sup>9</sup> Adams, Ceramic Industries I, 242.

<sup>10</sup> Adams, Ceramic Industries I, 242.

<sup>11</sup> Adams, Ceramic Industries I, 242.

<sup>12</sup> Element H 2 (Adams Ceramic Industries I, 293, Fig. 145).

<sup>13</sup> Adams, Ceramic Industries I, 291, Fig. 143.

<sup>7</sup> Adams, Ceramic Industries, 469–470.

<sup>8</sup> See Adams, Ceramic Industries II, v.a. Tab. 71, Fig. 326.



## PUBLISHED PARALLELS

Although the drinking goblet is a standard vessel of the 4<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century AD, only few exact parallels have been published so far. For example, a similar goblet was found in the settlement of Meinarti, situated on an island in Lower Nubia.<sup>14</sup> Of the pottery vessels from the X-Group strata at Qasr Ibrim, about a third (246 specimens) were assigned to ceramic group R1, but only four specimens are illustrated and none was a direct parallel to our object.<sup>15</sup>

The few published analogies of such goblets were found during the survey between Faras and Gemmai, which show similar vessels but no direct parallels.<sup>16</sup>

Sometimes the shape is the same, but not the decoration.<sup>17</sup> In other examples, there is an analogous decoration, but the shape does not correspond to the object in Münster.<sup>18</sup>

Similar both in form and in decoration are two goblets, one from Gammai and one from Mirmad. Additionally, there is a specimen from the Dal cataract, which however is considerably larger.<sup>19</sup> A clear parallel is a goblet from Sayala, which is only reproduced in drawing and otherwise not described in detail.<sup>20</sup> In Sayala, a large number of such drinking vessels were found in close association with wine



Goblet in the Archaeological Museum of the University of Münster, Inv. No. 176  
(photo: L. Hecht).

amphorae, so that the excavators assumed the place to be a wine tavern. Meanwhile, the place is regarded as a cult site, as several stone offering tablets and the unusual character of the whole deposition point to a more ritual than profane function.<sup>21</sup>

## DISCUSSION

From the reviewed evidence, we can state that the drinking vessel Inv.-No. 176 is a typical object of the so-called X-Group period. The X-Group is the archaeological culture that appeared extensively in Lower Nubia after the collapse of the Meroe Empire.<sup>22</sup>

14 Adams, Meinarti I, pl. 17d.

15 Adams, Qasr Ibrim, 81, tab. 4, 84, tab. 5, 242, pl. 9.

16 Adams, West Bank Survey, pl. 22.a.14 seems to correspond to the shape, pl. 22.c.2 to the decoration.

17 Kirwan, Firka, pl. XXV, no. 20c. Strouhal, Wadi Qitna, fig. 95.

18 Kirwan, Firka, pl. XXV, no. 20e. Strouhal, Wadi Qitna, fig. 96.

19 Gammai: Bates and Dunham, „Gammai“, pl. LXXII. Mirmad: Presedo Velo, Mirmad, fig. 1, 16b. Dal-cataract: Vila, Prospection, fig. 24c.

20 Kromer, Römische Weinstuben, 102, Abb. 33.8. See also Taf. 40.10. Taf. 35–45 show similar cups with carinated profile, but mostly without painting. Kromer still assumes a date in the Meroitic period, but the entire assemblage points to the Post-Meroitic period (Edwards, Nubian Past, 209).

21 Edwards, Nubian Past, 209.

22 A good summary is provided in Edwards, Nubian Past, 195–211.



Goblet in the Archaeological Museum of the University of Münster, Inv. No. 176 (photo: L. Hecht).

It differs in many respects from the Meroitic civilisation, attested by sudden changes in settlement pattern, in funerary customs, and in religious concepts. This break is also apparent in the material culture of the period, which was possibly connected to a different economic system. This period saw the introduction of the water-wheel, which on the one hand allowed for larger areas to be used for agriculture and on the other hand made it possible to cultivate other, new crops. Furthermore, especially in northern Lower Nubia, influences from Roman Egypt were strongly felt, both as imports (especially of luxury goods) and as local imitations of Egyptian vessels. Due to the spatial proximity to Egypt, the impact was also recognisable during the X-Group. In contrast, these influences from the Mediterranean world are hardly noticeable south of the Second Nile cataract after the disintegration of the Meroitic Empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.

This difference in the material culture between Lower and Upper Nubia also affected installations and objects related to the custom of wine drinking. There is evidence that "considerable quantities of wine amphorae were entering the region from Egypt" in Late and Postmeroitic periods.<sup>23</sup> Several basins have been found in Lower Nubia, interpreted as wine presses to independently produce wine and secure supplies, when wine imports from Egypt were interrupted in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup> Recently, the identification of these basins as wine presses has been questioned and a ritual function for

23 Edwards, Nubian Past, 208.

24 Adams, „Vintage“, especially 278–279.



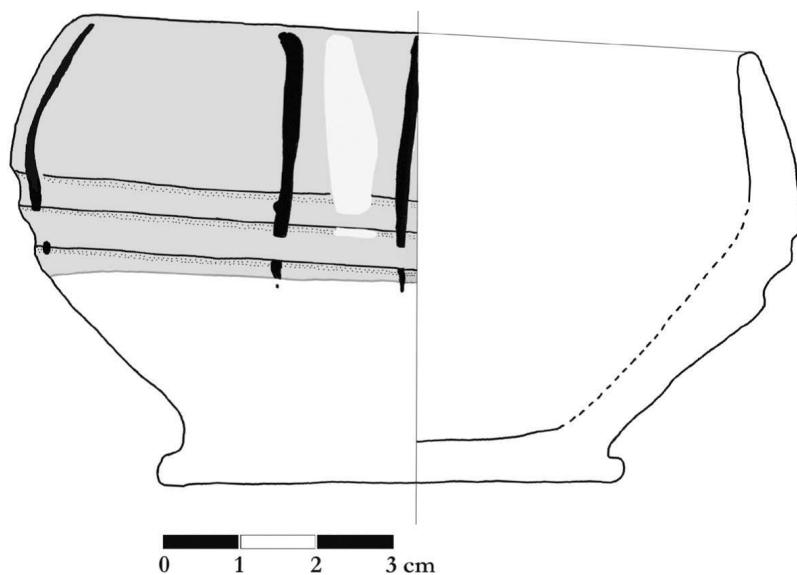
a (flood) water cult was instead postulated.<sup>25</sup> Spouts in the form of lion heads on these basins suggest a relationship to the lion god Apedemak.

In addition, abundant amphorae and drinking vessels for wine were discovered in various sites. Bill Adams, excavator of many X-Group houses and settlements, recognised a connection between the decline of orderly living conditions and the evidence of excessive wine consumption.<sup>26</sup> Török relativises this: "The drinking might have been one of the consequences of the general decline and not its main reason."<sup>27</sup>

What remains in terms of "hard facts" is the circumstance that drinking vessels in Late Antique Lower Nubia were used in abundance, which came down to us in large numbers. Our goblet in the Archaeological Museum could be a typical representative of it. However, the discovery of date seeds and poultry bones in such vessels, as well as the porous material in many cases, speaks against the assumed use as a drinking goblets.<sup>28</sup> Since our specimen consists of dense and hard pottery, and is also quite small, it is probably justified to regard it as a wine goblet.<sup>29</sup>

#### PROVENANCE

Finally, it should be explained how the vessel came from Nubia in Sudan to Münster in Germany. It originally belonged to the private collection of Otto Rubensohn (1867–1964), a high school teacher with a doctorate in archaeology who carried out excavations in the Mediterranean region in his early years. He also led several excavations in Egypt, carried out on behalf of the Berlin Papyrus Commission, whose aim was to obtain Egyptian papyri for the Berlin museums.<sup>30</sup> In 1906–1907 he was active on the island



Goblet in the Archaeological Museum of the University of Münster, Inv. No. 176 (drawing: A. Lohwasser).

of Elephantine, at the First Nile cataract, which constituted the southern border of ancient Egypt. In Elephantine, an extraordinary discovery was made: written testimonies of a military colony executed in many different languages, namely Demotic, Ancient Greek, Aramaic, Latin and Coptic. In addition to the actual aims of the ventures in Egypt, to find or acquire papyri, Rubensohn also built up a private collection. This consisted mainly of antiquities that were not accepted by the Berlin museums and which he acquired on his own account in the art trade.<sup>31</sup> This is also how our drinking vessel came into his collection, as the copy of his inventory states: „erworben im Kunsthändel. FO unbekannt“ (acquired in art trade. Place of discovery unknown).

The town of Elephantine was beyond the limits of Lower Nubia, and the main distribution of this pottery type lies about 100 km south of Elephantine. However, it is not improbable that individual specimens of Nubian manufacture reached the border of Egypt already in antiquity. However, it is equally possible that objects arrived in Egypt in the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when tourist and scientific interest in Nubia increased. *The First Archaeological Survey to Nubia*, led by George A. Reisner, began almost simultaneously with Rubensohn's excavation.<sup>32</sup> This survey started on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1907; while Otto Rubensohn had finished his excavation on 22<sup>nd</sup> February of the same year. Therefore, it is impossible that the vessel derives from this survey. Nevertheless, Rubensohn could have bought this

25 Bishop-Wright, „Reconsidering“, 163–167.

26 Adams, Nubia, 418.

27 Török, Late Antique Nubia, 212.

28 See Sakamoto, „Christianizing“, 50, n. 15.

29 Whether this vessel actually served for wine or another liquid cannot be clarified at present. The size corresponds to tableware, so that consumption can be assumed at least.

30 For an account of Rubensohn's excavation activities in Egypt see Kuckertz, „Jagd nach Papyri“.

31 Parlasca, „Abusir el-Meleq“, 61–62.

32 Reisner, Archaeological Survey.



object during his stay in Elephantine. However, the exact provenance remains unknown.

When Rubensohn emigrated to Switzerland in spring 1939, he was able to keep his collection of objects, while parts of his library and his valuables were confiscated.<sup>33</sup> In 1950, his former student Ernst Hellmut Vits visited him in Basel and developed a deep friendship. Vits had held the office of First Chairman of the Friends of the Westphalian Wilhelm-University of Münster since 1947, and after Rubensohn's death he sought to acquire his collection for the university's Archaeological Museum. This way the drinking vessel, together with more than 400 other objects, reached Münster in 1965.<sup>34</sup> Here it has so far remained the only evidence from Late Antique Nubia.

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#### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Im Archäologischen Museum der Universität Münster ist unter der Nr. 176 ein Becher der spätantiken nubischen X-Gruppe inventarisiert. Er stammt aus der Sammlung von Otto Rubensohn, der ihn 1907 vermutlich in Elephantine im Kunsthandel erworben hat. Der Becher ist ein typischer Vertreter der Keramik der X-Gruppe: bikonisch geformt mit einem Standring und mit wenigen informell gehaltenen weißen und schwarzen Strichen dekoriert. Der Artikel stellt das Gefäß vor und versucht eine kulturelle, chronologische und geographische Einordnung.

<sup>33</sup> Parlasca, „Abusir el-Meleq“, 62.

<sup>34</sup> Nieswandt and Salzmann, „Ausgewählte Artefakte.“