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The archaeology of Wadi el-Dan North of ancient Meroe: Excavations of some unusual Tumulus Graves[1]

Introduction

The tumulus is a prominent feature in Sudanese archaeology; it has been recorded in many regions of north and central Sudan, distributed along the Nile and in the desert (Adams 1977; Lenoble 1994; Edwards 1998). Many tumuli date to the early, late and post-Meroitic periods, while other forms of stone grave superstructures are common among C-group and Kerma period (Nassr 2019: 127). In this area, little is yet known of burials of the 2nd and 1st millennium BC.

The archaeology of tumuli has received limited attention in the archaeology of the island of Meroe, despite of the intensive studies that took place in the region since early 20th century. Most studies have focused in the Meroitic royal and urban establishments such as temples, settlements and the royal cemeteries. The first tumuli excavations took place by the University of Liverpool expedition, directed by J. Garstang, in the area between the Sun Temple and Western Cemetery in Meroe. This work has shown a different style of burials with an unfamiliar range of handmade pottery in them (Garstang et al 1911: 29–38). Moreover, the archaeological work done in the site of Meroe in 1980s tentatively identified what may have been post-Meroitic levels within the settlement, including 'squatter occupation' in some of the temples (Bradley 1984), but its scale and character was never really determined and no material from this phase has yet been published (Edwards 2004, 187). Recent work at Hamadab has shown that much of its settlement is of late and post-Meroitic date (ca. 50 AD–400 AD). The shallow remains in the center of the mound show that the individual modifications have gradually changed the town original strict layout into a more irregular conglomerate with its industrial facilities developing successively (Nowotnick et al, 2017: 13).

The most important work carried out at (mainly post-Meroitic) tumuli graves in the island of Meroe was conducted by the French Unit in 1987 in the sites of Kadada and El-Hobagi on the west bank in the southern Shendi Reach which shows very obvious continuities between Meroitic 'imperial' royal rituals and 'post-pyramidal' Meroitic monarchy (Lenoble 2018).

Moreover, other substantial cemeteries have been excavated at different places. These include most important sites as Sabaloka East (Nassr 2019: 127–134), Kadada near Shendi (Lenoble 1994), and Gabati, some 40 km north of Meroe (Edwards 1998). Most of the excavated examples seem to be of post-Meroitic date sharing similar features and materials. However, a few other tumulus burials excavated in this region, such as around Jebel Makbor, seem likely to date to earlier periods (Lenoble 1987). However, very few examples have been excavated and these remain difficult to date. This is because the burial forms are unusual, and most of them lack artefacts. In the absence of radiocarbon dates, their date cannot be determined. Very little is still known about burial archaeology of earlier periods in this region or the date of the 100,000s of tumuli visible along the desert edge between the 6th and 5th Cataracts (Lenoble 1992).

Department of Archaeology University of Khartoum carried out two projects in Wady el-Neel, the first around Futuar – el-Daigah in the Fifth Cataract region during June to July 2001 (Osman 2001), and recently at Wadi el-Dan and Wadi Aish in the northern environs of ancient Meroe since 2011. Much more archaeological data were compiled and physical anthropological investigations have been undertaken on mound graves.

1 This article couldn't see the light without the encouragement from Prof. Dr. Angelika Lohwasser, Dr. David Edwards and Prof. Dr. Mahmoud el-Tayeb.

The topography and location of the site

Wadi el-Dan is located on the eastern bank of the Nile about 13km north of ancient Meroe (N 16° 59' 152, E 33° 43' 758), on an open area West and North-West of Shebliya village, 500 m west of the Khartoum – Atbara highway.

This area has large numbers of prominent mound graves. The Wadi is one important channel among others draining from el-Diheara area in northern Butana region, such as Wadi Aeash, Wadi el- Trabil, Wadi Hawad, and Wadi Awatib (Fig. 1).

The landscape on the area appears as a rather unimposing flat stretch of fertile land as a part of the greater Meroe region. The river plain is considerably wide and rich, stretching for more than 5 km north–south. This rich river plain is engulfed by a range of mountainous plateaus which encroache towards the river bank, at its northern and southern ends, forming a belly-like sandy gravel ground.

This plateau continues for more than 10 km allowing only for an opening at its northern end for the village of Umm Ali, (see Fig. 1) where the famous Sheikh, Hamid Abu A'sa and his sons, are buried in four conspicuous Qubbas (Osman 2015: 117). The range opens up when we reach El-Mahmiya, a considerable modern settlement and railway station, and also the site of a large Meroitic settlement, the remains of which are manifested in a very large mound cut through by the railway (Osman 2015: 117).

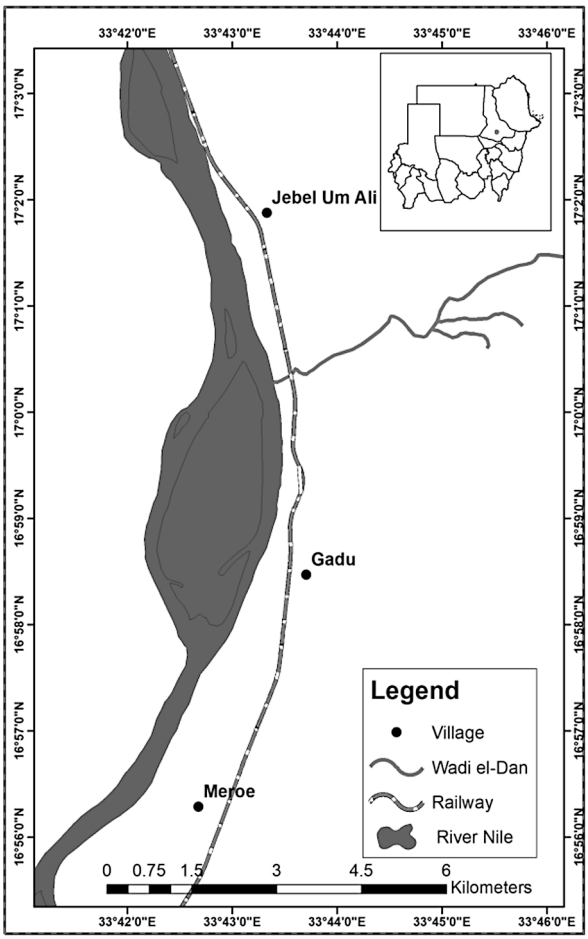

Fig. 1: The location of Wadi el-Dan.

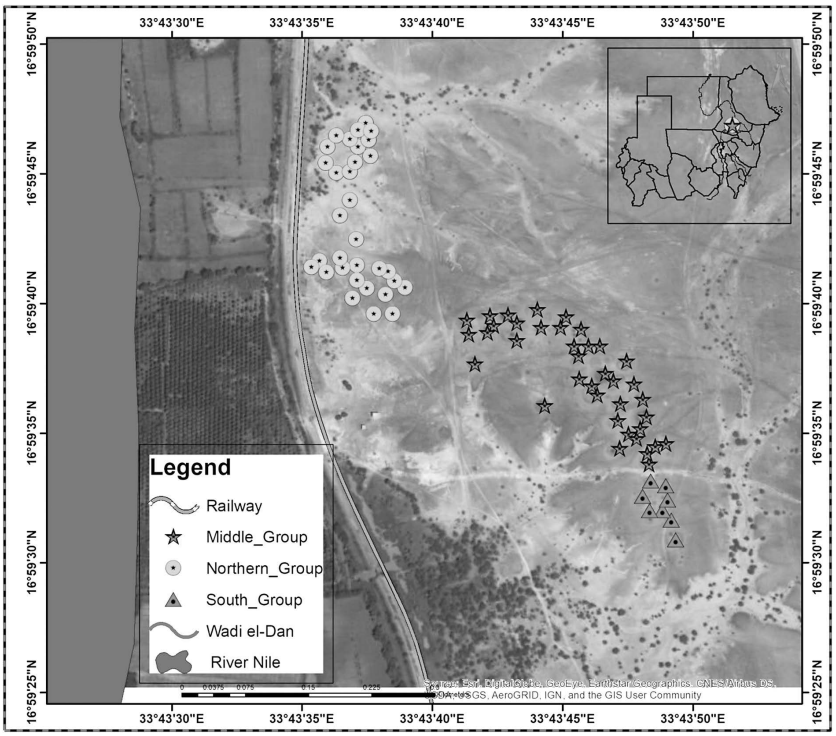

Fig. 2: Topographical setting and cemetery distribution of el-Dan area, excavated southern group as pink triangles.

In this area, the river runs on Nubian sandstone as far as Ed-Damer, where it meets the formation of basement complex. The river is flanked by wide terraces (3–4 km wide) in the south of Shendi area; and the Nubian escarpment, the free-face weathering back from the river, is as much as 56 km from the bank and over 55 m high (Berry and Whiteman 1968: 23).

The general topographical setting of the area of el-Dan is marked by two features; namely Wadis, Khors and wide plains. The Wadis and Khors originate in the nearer hinterlands flowed from the Butana region (Tahir 2017: 230), and the large plains are a thick sedimentation deposit which overlies a wide area. The Wadi itself ends in a

large delta and separates the site into different portions (Fig. 2, Colour fig. 2).

Antiquities within Wadi el-Dan

The cemeteries of Wadi el-Dan were firstly reported by F. Hintze when he noticed some burials in this area under the name of El-Maroga 1-2, where there is a very large tumulus still standing 3 m high (Hintze 1959: 175).

The area around Wadi el-Dan consists of a large cemetery in which over 1000 circular mound graves can be identified. It reaches from Wadi Aish in the south to about 500 m between the railway and Wadi el-Dan. The area covered by the tumuli is divided into three or four portions characterized by the black Nubian sandstone and sand, scoured by water courses. Each area of the plateau contains a group of burial mounds, the largest one always situated in the center. In all cases, these mounds were covered with rough stones and appeared quite similar.

The mounds in Wadi el-Dan area have been in an increasing danger of destruction, and in many cases their height has been significantly reduced due to both natural and human factors especially at the fringes of the cemetery.

Excavations within Wadi el-Dan

The excavations at Wadi El-Dan is a part of the University of Khartoum Project under the title: 'The Archaeology of the Northern Environs of ancient Meroe', directed by Professor Ali Osman. Its aim is to study geography, topography, culture, economic and environmental factors in areas north of Meroe (Osman 2013: 2).

Four field seasons of excavations were carried out by the University of Khartoum within the framework of student training during the winters of 2011–2016. Two unpublished preliminary reports exist (Osman 2013; Bashir and Saaid 2016); this paper presents fuller details.

The area was divided into small sections for the systematic survey and landscape exploration, in order to investigate each section and draw a general survey map. The three cemeteries sections were labelled south, middle, and northern cemetery groups (see Fig. 2, Colour fig. 2). These area is divided by erosion channels. It is suggested that these three sections also represented chronological units. The middle group of burials (see Fig. 2, Colour fig. 2) seems likely to contain the earlier burials. Here the graves were covered by big mounds from stone, which appeared quite similar.

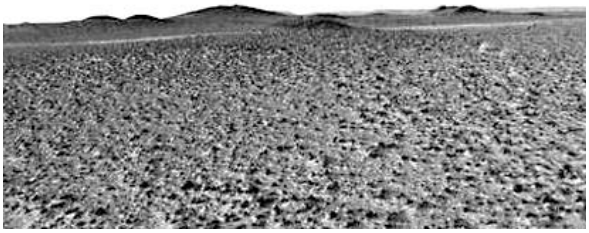

Fig. 3: General view of Wadi el-Dan.

Fig. 4: General view of Wadi el-Dan.

The southern group (Group 1 = MMAK) contains 51 mound graves of black stone (see Fig. 2, Colour fig. 2). Six graves were excavated, selected from the most threatened mounds, which were endangered by main roads. The graves were either excavated completely, or, in the case of the first big excavated tomb (MMAK5), it was divided into four sections to have an idea about the burial shaft position. All the excavated tombs were found to be intact. Generally, the superstructures of these tumuli consist of black sandstones of variable sizes between 2–8m in diameter and 0.20–0.50 m height.

There were no inscriptions or a big number of painted pottery inside the tombs; the red pottery was commonly soft and lacking any burnish.

The burial were generally beneath the centre of the tumulus about 0.50 m to 1 m deep from the tumuli surface. The burial cuts more or less cleanly in the hard layer of gravel and is filled up with white sand. In the small tombs there was only one chamber, and in all cases there was only one burial chamber, except MMKA2. The position of the body is contracted in 5 burials and elongated in 4.

Description of the excavated tombs

Grave (MMAK1)

Superstructure: a low sub-circular tumulus 1.50 m in diameter with a curb of small stones and cobbles with a maximum height of 0.50 m. The mound was of mixed black sandstones, sandy silts and small gravels. Animal bones, shells, red and black pottery sherds were recovered amongst the stones of the superstructure.

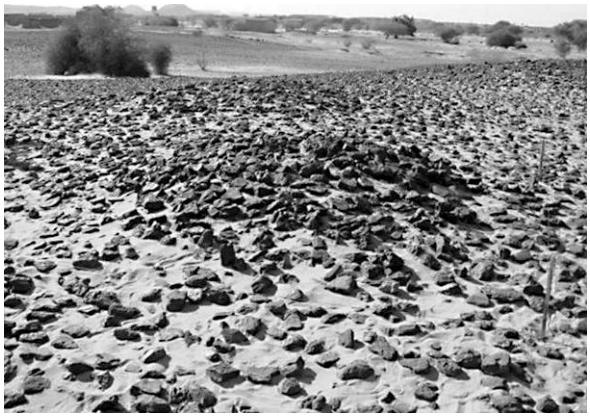

Fig. 5: Superstructure of MMAK1.

Substructure: The grave has a rectangular shaft at the bottom of a cylindrical pit, measuring 2 m in diameter and 0.50 m depth below modern ground surface.

The fill of the grave consists of sand mixed with gravel and mud. Some snails, shells and a few undecorated pottery sherds were recovered from the fill and it may have no connection to the burial.

Burial: An undisturbed dorsally extended burial of an adult, female, oriented east–west, head to the west, facing south; hands across the pelvis were recovered at a depth of 0.30 m in the cylindrical pit measuring 1.60 m length and 0.30 m width.

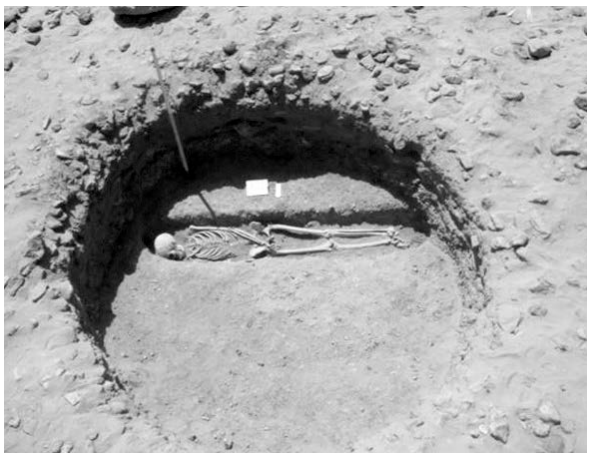

Fig. 6: Substructure of MMAK1.

Grave (MMAK2)

Superstructure: a low sub-circular tumulus 2 m in diameter, 0.30 m height. The superstructure consists of black sandstones, sand and a little gravels, similar to grave number 1. After the removing of the mound a fragment of pottery, coal, and shells as well as animal bones were recovered at the area of the two burials, and it might not be related to the tumulus..

Fig. 7: Superstructure of MMAK2.

Substructure: The grave has two burial pits at the bottom of a semi-oval pit, measuring 2.50 m in diameter and 1 m depth below modern ground surface. It is filled by several layers of different grain sizes (sand, sand mixed with gravel, and gravel).

Burial: Two skeletons were recovered from different burial pits at a depth of 0.85 m. Skeleton number one is male, found at the eastern part of the grave in a cylindrical pit measuring 1.50 m length, 0.30 m width, and 0.50 m depth from the modern surface. The skeleton is oriented east–west, with head to the east, facing up. The second skeleton is female, laid on the western side of the grave in a semi-cylindrical pit, measuring 1 m length, 0.35 wdith and 0.30 m depth from the surface. The skeleton in a semi-contracted east–western position, with head facing south. Some pottery sherds, shells, and snails connected with this grave were recovered.

Fig. 8: Substructure of MMAK2.

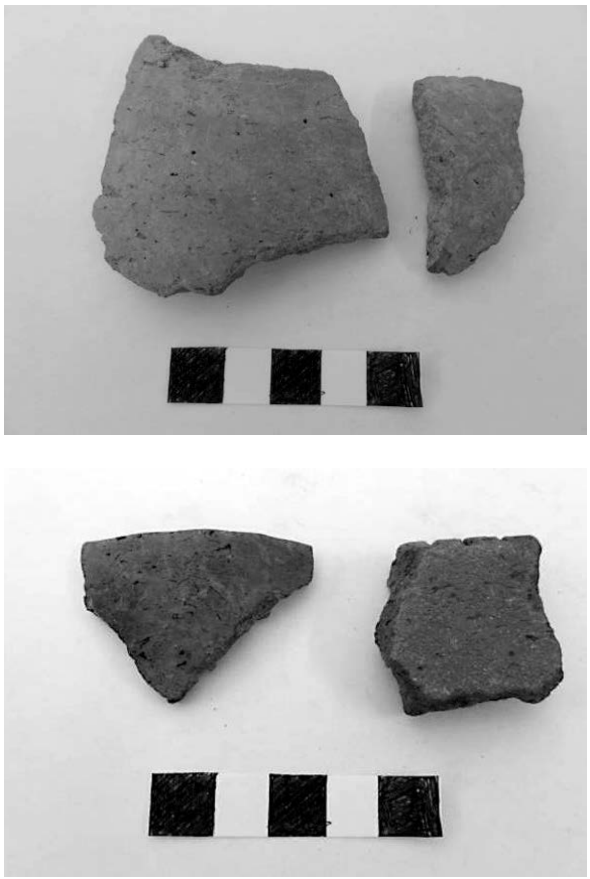

Fig. 9: Selection of handmade pottery from MMAK2.

Grave (MMAK3)

Superstructure: It was a large tumulus near the west end of the cemetery, which was about 4 m in diameter and 0.5 m high. Like the others, its outer surface was clad by small dark stones.

Fig. 10: Superstructure of MMAK3.

Substructure: Following the removal of the mound, a central shallow shaft was exposed at the depth 0.15 m, measuring 1,50 x 0.70 m, oriented east–west. The unpreserved upper part of a male skeleton was recovered with sherds with traces of black and red color.

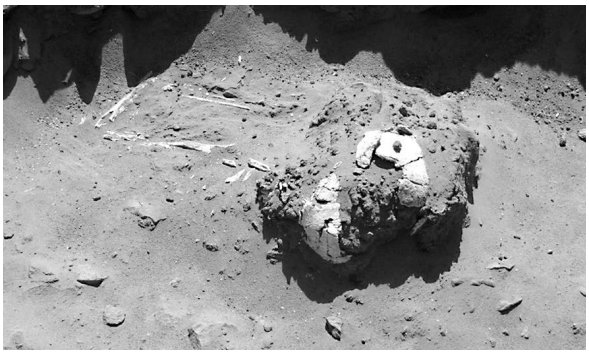

Fig. 11: MMAK3, an upper part of a skeleton with fragments of a skull.

Burial: During the clearing of the tumulus rounded shaft, a further narrow shaft grave covered with stone slabs was excavated at the depth of 0.60 m, measuring 0.70 x 1.00 m. The lower part of a male was 0.50 m long. The surviving articulated bones of the lower skeleton allow us to deduce that the skeleton originally laid in a contracted position on its right side, aligned north–south, head to the south and facing east. Some beads and a small green faience amulet in the form of god Pataikos were recovered with this burial.

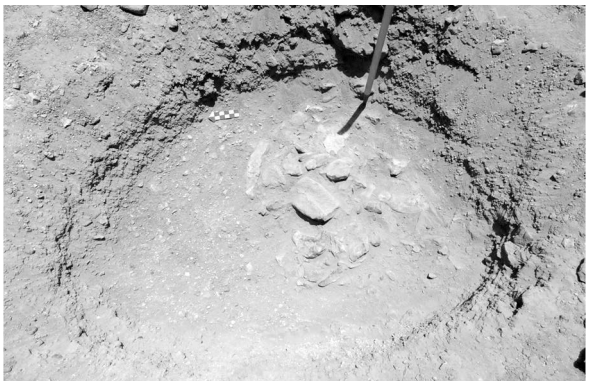

Fig. 12: Narrow shaft grave with stone slabs of MMAK3.

Fig. 13: MMAK3, lower part of a skeleton.

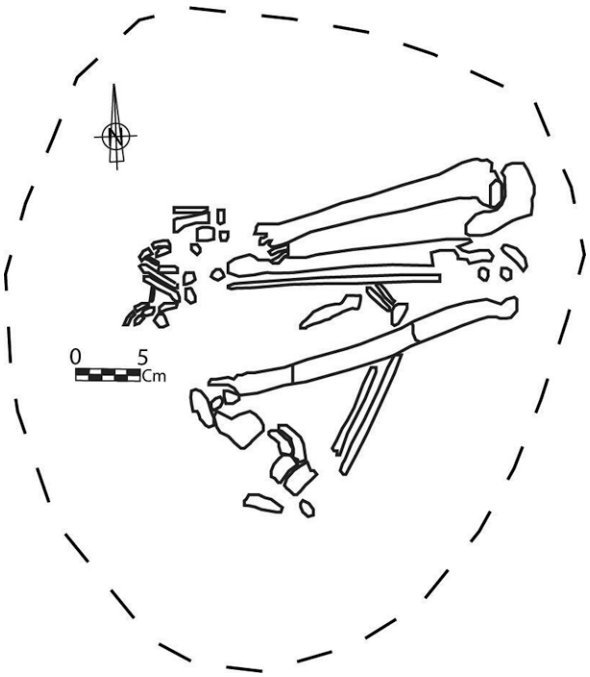

Fig. 14: Lower part of skeleton Grave MMAK3.

Fig. 15: Faience amulet in form of Pataikos, MMAK3.

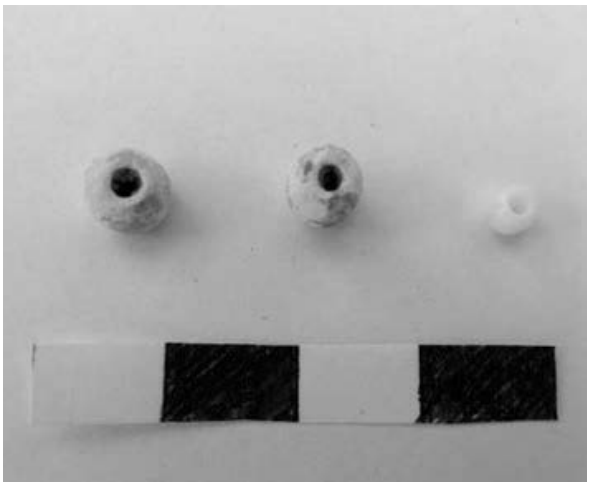

Fig. 16: Some faience and stone or glass beads from the grave.

Grave (MMAK4)

Superstructure: This grave was 2.5 m in diameter, 0.20 m high, covered with black sandstone slabs and some sand.

Substructure: Shallow rounded shaft with 2 m in diameter and 0.20 m in depth.

Burial: The intact burial was an extended female lying on the back, oriented east–west, head to the east, facing north; hands crossed over the pelvis. No grave goods were found.

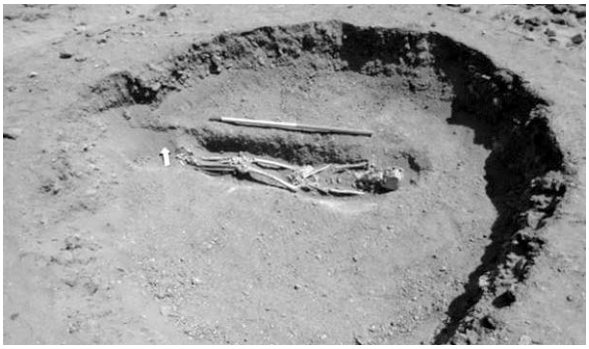

Fig. 17: Extending position of MMAK4

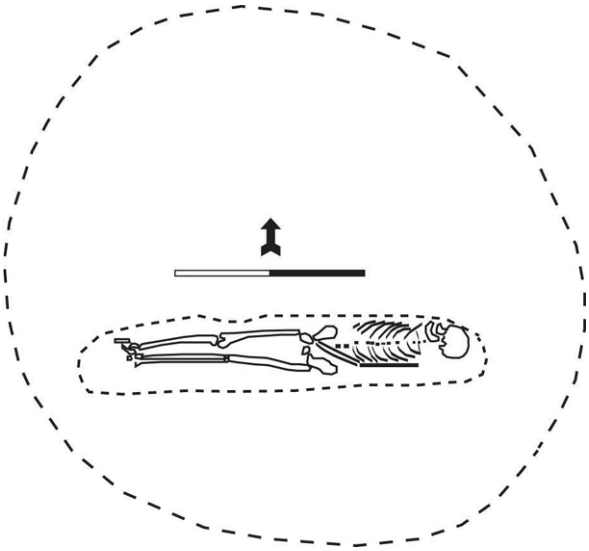

Fig. 18: Grave MMAK4

Grave (MMAK5)

Superstructure: The mound was circular (8 m in diameter), constructed with small and large stones (black sandstone), the mound is 0.40 m high.

Substructure: The grave was shallow, 0.20 m deep, with a circular shaft in the south–eastern part of the mound, at a depth of 0.20 m. The complete diameter of the shaft was 1.50 m long, and 0.75 m wide. It was filled by earth and gravel.

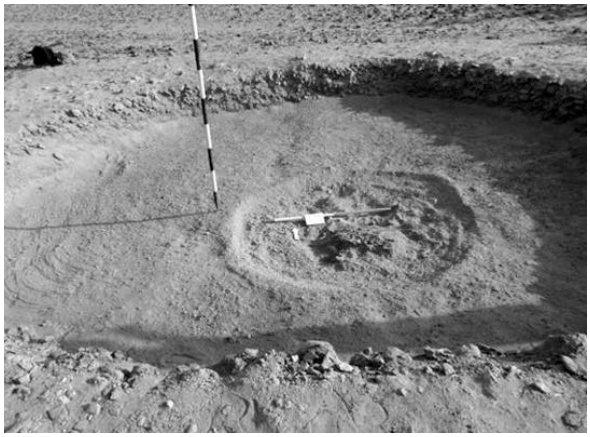

Fig. 19: MMAK5, first shaft.

Burial: the grave contained parts of five bodies, from up to down: (A) the first body was of a child, which was found in bad state of preservation at a depth of 0.20 m. (B) The second was an east–west oriented adult woman, headed to the south, found at a depth of 0.35 m in a contracted position.

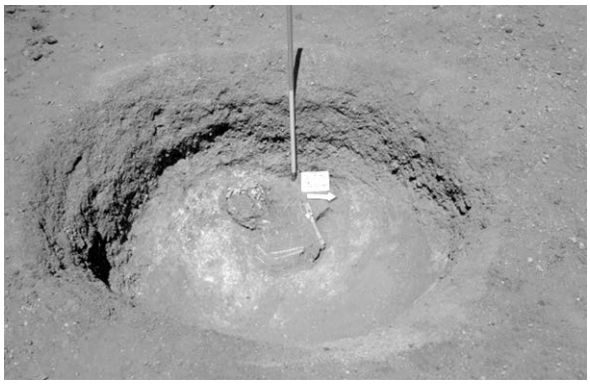

Fig. 20: MMAK5 (B), the burial of female.

(C) The third was a remnant of another child at the depth of about 0.45 m. (D) The fourth was the upper half of an adult man recovered in a depth of 0.70 m. He was wearing three necklaces, one of iron rings and others of rare precious Agate. The lower half of the adult male was not found in this grave.

Fig. 21: MMAK5 (D), the burial of upper part of a male.

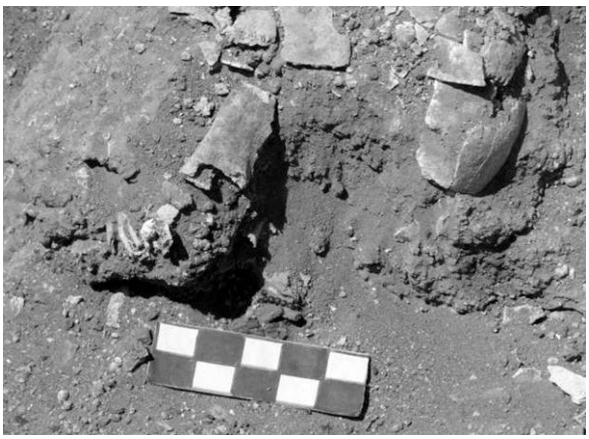

Fig. 22: Detail: necklaces of MMAK5 (D).

(E) The fifth were the remains of an animal. It might be a dog, connected with the burial of this male, since it was found in front of him.

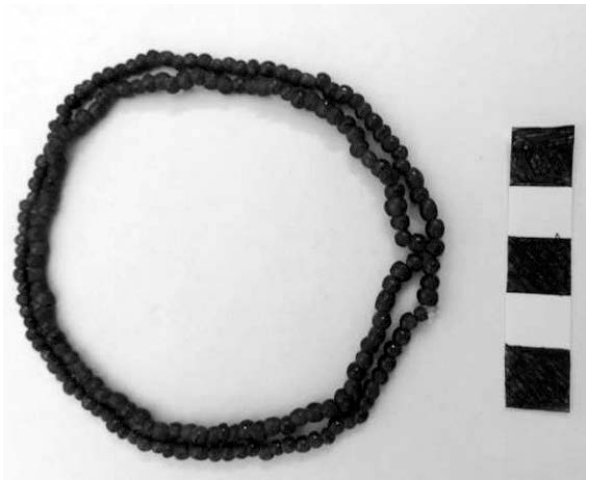

Fig. 23: Iron and Aggeg rings of MMAK5 from male burial (D).

Grave (MMAK6)

Superstructure: This was a big mound of about 9 m in diameter and 0.50 m high. It consists of small and large black sandstones.

Fig. 24: MMAK6 before excavation.

Substructure: Is a rounded shaft with 3 m in diameter and 0.50 m in depth. The layers of the substructure consists of several different strata of soil, sand, mixed with gravel, and earth. Pieces of decorated pottery and shells were recorded at a depth of 0.40 m in the north–western part of the grave.

Burial: The grave was composed of two burial pits. The first is a semi-oval shallow pit of 0.20 m depth with a circular shaft in the south-eastern part of the mound. At a depth of about 0.20 m a disturbed skull was recovered, surrounded by some blocks. No other bones or artifacts were found connected to this skull.

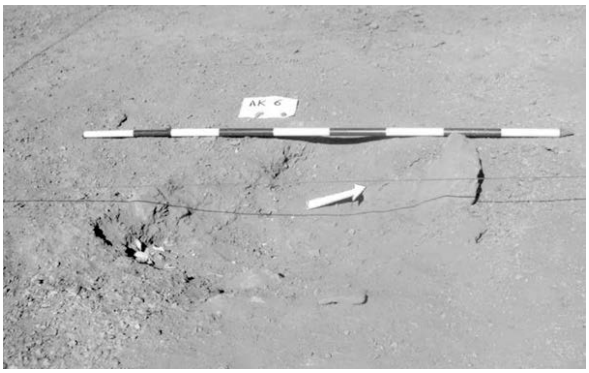

Fig. 25: Disturbed skull of MMAK6.

Fig. 26: Pottery sherds from MMAK6.

Another cylindrical shaft of about 1.50 m x 0.30 m was noticed in the grave a distance of 0.50 m south of the first burial pit. An extended east–west oriented skeleton, head to the east, facing north, was recovered at a depth of 0.20 m. No artifacts was related to this skeleton.

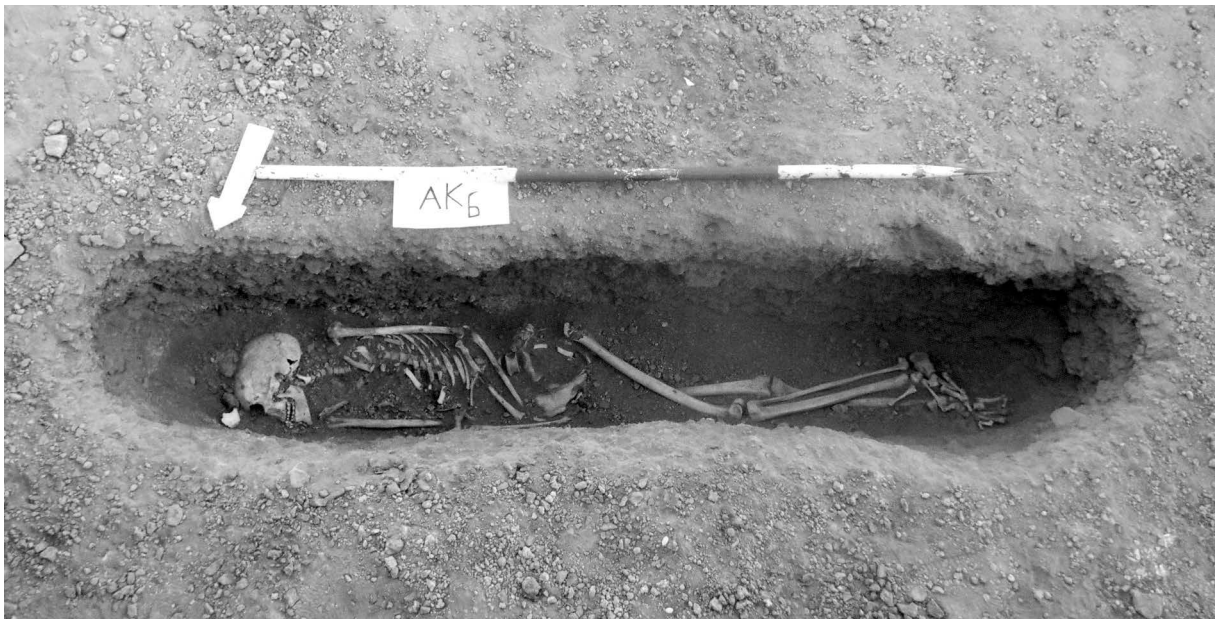

Fig. 27: Extended position of the second burial of MMAK6.

Conclusion

The archaeological surveys and excavations carried out in the northern environs of ancient Meroe revealed numerous archaeological sites dating back to various periods from Neolithic, early Meroitic to Medieval.

The sites consist of thousands of tumuli, especially in the Wadi el-Dan and Wadi Aish, which are adjacent Wadies and possibly two different branches of one Wadi coming down from the hilly area behind the Meroitic pyramids. The mounds are separated in different portions by the Wadi el-Dan. Their types, their distributional and structural characteristics can support the assumption that mound graves have been continually used during a long period. Therefore, it will be wrong to take them as diagnostic to one specified period such as the post-Meroitic. For instance, our four seasons of excavations in the area contributed in highlighting some important issues related to the burial customs and traditions of the people buried at Wadi el-Dan, and as in many similar excavations, this work has raised more questions than those which it attempted to answer.

Information obtained regarding burial customs from excavated graves show that the dead were laid down in cylindrical/oval-shaped pits. They had an east–west orientation, head to the west, facing south twice, and head to the east, facing north twice, or north–south, head to the south, facing east, in a contracted or extended position. In extended position, the hands were crossed over the pelvis in graves AK1, AK4, and this demonstrate the disarray of the funeral rites, which led to suggest different periods of the burials.

Extended position with the hands on the pelvis of tumulus (AK1, AK4) is a common practice for the female burials in different Meroitic sites such as Gebel Makbor (Lenoble 1987a, 222–227), El Geili (Caneva 1988), and Abu Erteila (Fantusati 2014: 88). The comparative analysis of this type of inhumation also demonstrates a similarity with late Meroitic burials (4th century A.D.) in El-Kadada (Lenoble 1987b: 89, 101), Gabati, 'grave Nu. T12', (Edwards 1998: 74) and burials in the area of 4th Nile Cataract (El-Tayeb and Kolosowska 2005: 64).

The double burial of AK2 in one shaft is a rare type of grave. This type of interment was noted in two graves at the cemetery of Gerf el Humar in the 4th Cataract area (El-Tayeb and Kolosowska 2005: 63) dated back to the early Meroitic phase. Also, the type of this grave occur in northern Nubia at the cemeteries of Qustul, Sai Island and Gebel Ghaddar, as well as Gabati and El Kadada in the Central Sudan (Williams 1991: 286-294; Geus 1998: 85-126; Zurawski 1987: 41-46; Edwards 1998).

The discovery of an amulet in the form of god Pataikos in grave MMAK 3 seems to be very interesting since it could give us an indication to date this grave. Ever since the examination of similar types from Tombos under the anthropological and archaeological conceptions of materiality, they are linked to the individuals that would have come in contact with and used them. Likewise, both object and individual can be connected back into the larger contemporary social sphere of which they would have been an active part (Bornemann and Smith 2020: 46).

Samples of similar amulets were reported only in the major Egyptian Third Intermediate and early Kushite cemeteries in Nubia, from the large cemetery of Missiminia (Vila 1980) to the north and far to the south at the early Western cemetery at Meroe (Dunham 1963), reflecting their spread throughout the Kushite kingdom in the Napatan period. They also appeared in an Egyptian and Napatan interaction cemetery of Tombos (Bornemann and Smith 2020), as well as at Sanam (Lohwasser 2010), and in a royal context at el-Kurru (Dunham 1950), where many amulets were found within queens' tombs dating to the reign of Piankhy and his successor Shabaqo (Ku 51–54).

The grave MMAK5 show a multi burial with five bodies in one grave, interred either at the same time or one after the other. Burials of more than one individual in a single grave were reported in two cemeteries of the 4th Cataract region at Gerf el Humar and El Higliga, dated to the Meroitic period (El-Tayeb and Kolosowska 2005: 63). Multiple or double burial is a tradition known from other parts of Upper and Lower Nubia and points to family relationships rather than human sacrifice (El-Tayeb and Kolosowska 2005: 64).

The burial of the last male excavated in this grave yield personal pieces of adornment, beads of faience, iron rings and ostrich egg shell and this could give also an indication to the date of this tomb.

The animal skeleton associated with the male in this grave is of interest, since the community of human and animal skeletons seem to have been restricted to high-status 'royal' or 'princely' burials. Accordingly, the association of animal and human skeleton remains in this grave suggests that this burial was of an individual of some importance. The locations of both human and animal remains were in the same level. This is different to Lower Nubia since the animal remains always differ from the human remains in X-group cemeteries: the majority of animal remains were found in the ramps of the tombs,

rather than within the burial chambers (Dann 2008: 12).

The occurrence of the various grave types in the area of el-Dan might reflect a temporal pattern according to its shapes and features. The orientation of the graves and the posture of the skeletons were found in different directions: east–west in extended burials and north–south in contracted burials. Only minor attention was paid to exact alignments of the graves. This might reflect the production of the graves by non-professionals and the habituality of the practice (Näser 1999: 24). As yet, the exact date of the site remains uncertain due to the absence of radiocarbon dates. However, even from the limited material so far available one can suggest that the cemetery is of different dates, it may be from early Naptan to Medieval periods, but no certain information is available. However, it is clear that these are the tombs of much poorer people than those of the great cemeteries near the capital Meroe.

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Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag werden die Ergebnisse von vier Kampagnen archäologischer Ausgrabungen des Projekts der Universität Khartum in der nördlichen Umgebung des antiken Meroe diskutiert, die von 2011 bis 2016 stattgefunden haben. Die Daten wurden zum Teil während eines Studententrainings in der Gegend von Wadi el-Dan, Ostufer des Nils, etwa 13 km nördlich des antiken Meroe, 500 m westlich der Khartum-Atbara-Autobahn, gesammelt.

Es wurden sechs Tumuli in verschiedenen Größen ausgegraben, die unterschiedliche Bestattungsbräuche aufwiesen. Die wichtigsten unter ihnen sind die Bestattung eines halben Skeletts (Ober- bzw. Unterkörper) sowie die Bestattung von insgesamt fünf Individuem und einem Tier in einem Grab. Ebenso erwähnenswert ist der Fund eines Pataikos-Amuletts in einem Grab und von Eisen- und Edelsteinhalsketten in einem anderen. Unsere Ausgrabung zeigt auch Variationen im Unterbau der Tumulusgräber. Es gibt einige mit nur einer Grabgrube und andere mit zwei. Derartige Hinweise auf Veränderungen in den Grabkonstruktionen und dem Fundspektrum sowie in der Lage der Gräber führten uns zu der Annahme, dass die ausgegrabenen Gräber sehr unterschiedlich datiert werden müssen, zumindest von der frühen Napatanischen Zeit bis ins Mittelalter.