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Excavations at Sedeinga. A New Start

Claude Rilly and Vincent Francigny

The Sedeinga Archaeological Unit (SEDAU), a French mission funded by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the University of Paris-Sorbonne, undertook a new archaeological fieldwork campaign, from November 22nd until December 20th 2009 with a new director.¹ This marked a new beginning with a team comprised as it was of several young specialists in Meroitic studies, either having recently passed their PhDs or currently completing them. It also marked the resumption of fieldwork in the Meroitic necropolis, after a hiatus of seven years.² The team directed by Mrs Berger-el Naggar was engaged in several surveys around the Temple of Queen Tiyi during the final few seasons. The last large-scale archaeological fieldwork in the cemetery was conducted by the previous team in 2002 and focused on a group of Meroitic tombs with pyramidal superstructures in the part of Sector II extending eastward from the fringe of the camel track.

One of the main tasks of this season was to make an accurate topographical map of the site. An initial map had been produced by C. Meyer, surveyor at IGN, France, in December 1999. However, his survey was not detailed enough (2500 points) to produce a precise image of the topography of the site. Three weeks' work was necessary to record

22,500 points, nearly ten times more than in the previous survey. The surveyed area amounts to 570,000m² with the necropolis proper covering roughly half of this area. The survey was dense enough to generate a Digital Terrain Model with contour lines every 250mm. The topographical map is for now just a first draft of the general map of the site, to which the superstructures of the tombs will be added in the coming seasons. The map included in this report (Figure 1) is an enlargement of Sector II.

The excavation area chosen is contiguous with the last excavations conducted on Sector II by the former team. Two perpendicular rows of pyramids of medium size (3 to 5m wide) had been unearthed by our predecessors, one north-south and another west-east. This 'L'-shaped ensemble flanks

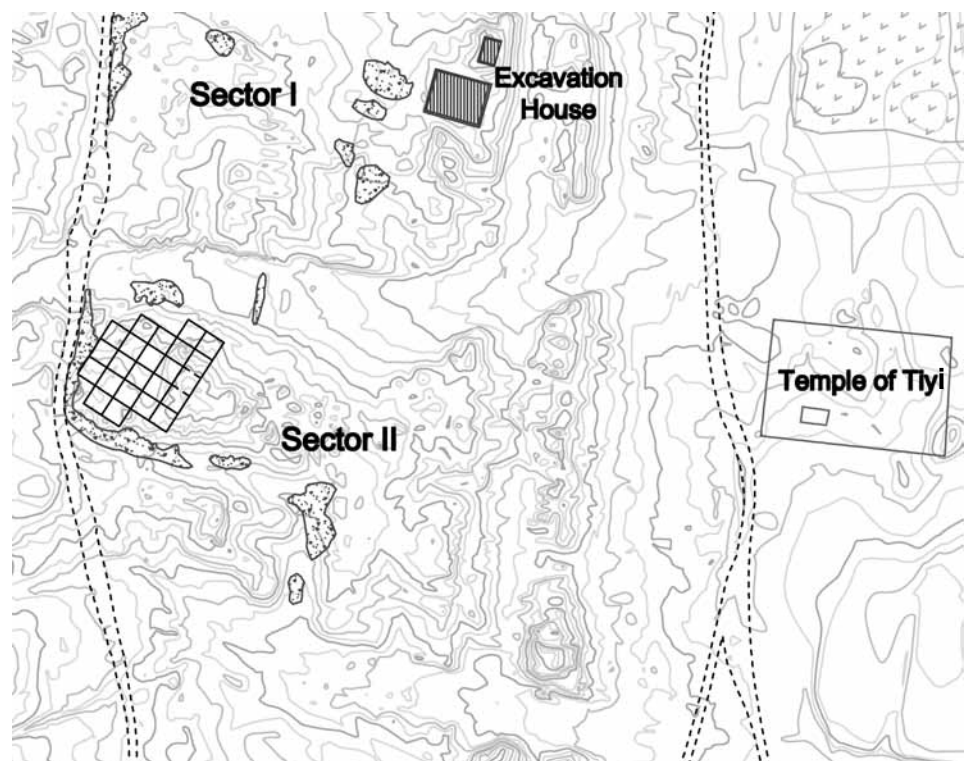


Figure 1. Section of the new topographical map of Sedeinga, enlarging Sector II.

¹ Claude Rilly, presently director of the French Unit of the NCAM (SFDAS) succeeded Catherine Berger-el Naggar, who retired in 2008 after several decades of fieldwork on this site, as director (and epigraphist) of the mission. The scientific team consisted of Vincent Francigny (co-director and archaeologist, SFDAS), Agathe Chen (anthropologist), Romain David (ceramologist), Marie Evina (ceramologist), Coralie Gradel (archaeologist), François Lenoir (surveyor, SFDAS), Awadallah Ali Al-Basha (driver, SFDAS) and Alphonse Andaba (cook). Our inspector on site, representing NCAM, was M. Al-Taieb al-Jak. The *rais* Abdelrahmane Fadl was at the head of a gang of workmen from the village of Qubbat Selim.

² For previous archaeological fieldwork in Sedeinga, see Berger 1988; 1994a; 1994b; Berger el Naggar 2008, Berger el Naggar and Leclant 2007, Berger *et al.* 1997; Grimal and Adly 2003; 2004; 2005; Leclant 1965; 1966a; 1966b; 1967; 1968; 1969; 1970; 1971; 1972; 1975; 1978; 1979; 1982a; 1982b; 1983; 1984; Leclant and Clerc 1985; 1987; 1988; 1989; 1990; 1991; 1993; 1994; 1995; 1996; 1997; 1998; Leclant and Minault-Gout 2000a; 2000b; 2001; Leclant and Soukiassan 1982; Reinold 1994; Schiff Giorgini 1965a; 1965b; 1966; 1967-1968; 1971.

a flat area that extends some 20m eastward until the next rise. After a north-oriented grid-system of 10 x 10m squares had been set up on the excavation area, a first trench was opened between the excavated area along the east-west row of pyramids and the rope marking the edge of the first square of the grid-system. Immediately, a series of small graves was discovered (II T 200 to 209), accompanied by a great number of small pits made by robbers in a zone where burials were not obvious from lack of superstructures.

In the following days, the excavation trench was extended westward, following the west-east row of pyramids. New graves appeared (II T 210 to 215), also without superstructures, and of small to medium size. During this period, the first graves were excavated to the natural. As expected, they



had all been severely looted by robbers, who left only scattered bones and potsherds. Most of the tombs had already been plundered soon after the first burials and reused in later, though Meroitic, times, as shown by the fact that the mud-brick blockings between the descendaries and the burial chambers were frequently built upon the remains of previous burials such as the wind-blown sand fill of an emptied cavity or fragments of wood coffins. We could only thoroughly excavate eight tombs this season (Colour plate R1). The remainder of the graves will be excavated next season.

From the few artefacts found on the surface or in the descendaries, it is obvious that the burials in all the excavated areas were rather poor: the ceramic remains are of good quality, consisting of painted and/or stamped fineware, but they are too few to allow the reconstruction of more than a bottle and a tumbler for each tomb. The deceased were dressed, adorned with glass and faience jewellery, wrapped in shrouds and buried in wooden coffins. From all of these elements, only chips and beads have been unearthed. Of note was a fine amulet (Colour plate R2) in blue-glazed faience, depicting the *ankb*-sign above a crescent, which might be the well-known symbol of the god Apedemak.

The major finds of the 2009 season came from the western part of the trench, and more precisely from the surface of tombs II T 211 to 215. This area has yielded several large stone artefacts which are unlikely to originate from these small graves, but probably came from the pyramids that surround them. Two sandstone pyramid capstones were unearthed, one (Plate 1) being the largest ever found in Sedeinga. Only the upper part is preserved, depicting a blossoming lotus-flower, with a rarely observed set of concentric circles between the petals and the pistil. In the same area, two inscribed funerary sandstone stelae were discovered. The first (II T 215 s1, Figure 2 and Plate 2) was nearly complete. From the second stela, two contiguous fragments were discovered at the surface of tomb II T 212 (Plate 3), both finely written in Meroitic cursive and carefully engraved. As with the capstones, such fine material can hardly originate from the simple tombs from whence they were found, but must have migrated, as the result of repeated looting, from the prestige burials with pyramidal superstructures located north and west of this part of the site.

West of the trench, alongside the second pyramid of the north-south row, a small unlooted tomb was discovered (Plate 4). Its location by the superstructure was so discreet that it not only escaped the robbers, but also



Plate 1. Lotus-shaped pyramid capstone (II T 214).

the archaeologists during the previous campaigns.³ When excavated, it became clear that the men who dug the grave changed their mind during the work and decided to make a lateral cavity instead of an axial one. Unfortunately, the burial was even poorer than the former, but the elements remained

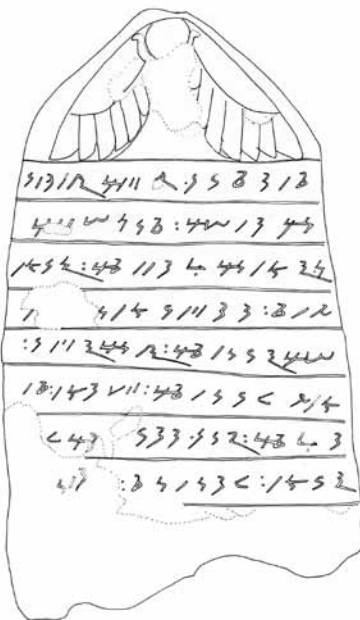


Figure 2. Facsimile of Takatelito's funerary stela (II T 215 s1).



Plate 2. Takatelito's funerary stela.

³ Meroitic burials of infants and juveniles are frequently located at the margin or even inside the superstructures. In that case they are often sealed under thick layers of plaster and mortar, washed down by rains and erosion, which are frequently considered by the excavators to be the ground level (Francigny 2008, 280).



Plate 3. Second funerary stela (II T 212s1).

in situ: a seven year old child had been laid there in a coffin carved in the trunk of a dom palm-tree, with a cover in the

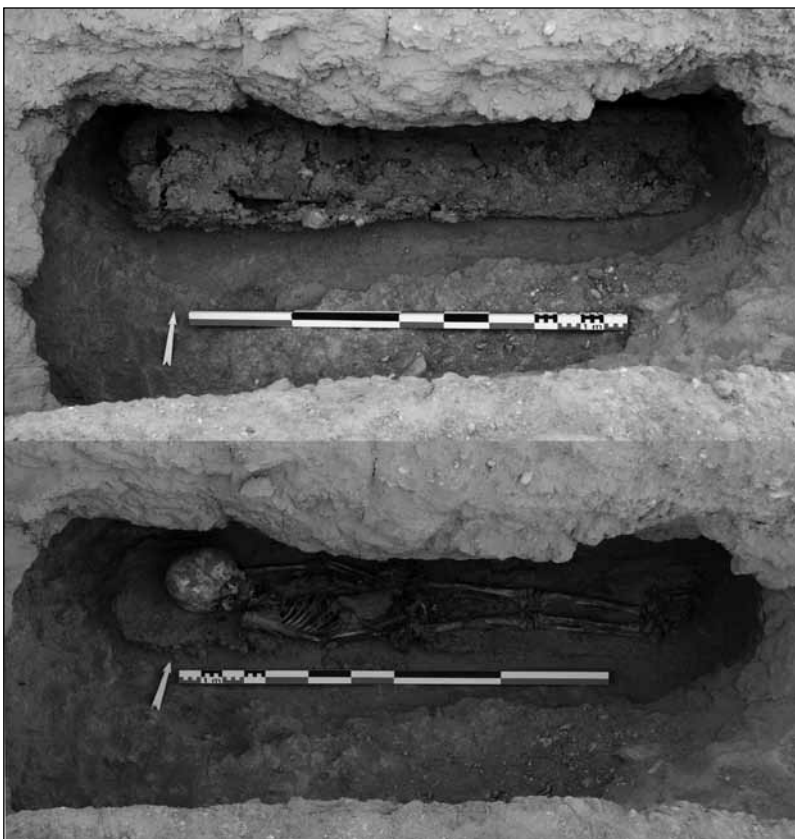


Plate 4. Unlooted burial of an immature (II T 217), before and after removal of the coffin.

same material, tied together with a rope. The wood had almost disappeared being replaced by termite dung but the shape of the coffin was preserved. The skeleton bore remnants of a hide garment and had been wrapped as a shroud.

During the third week, the trench was continued southward, but it soon became clear that this part of the area was occupied by a huge sand quarry. Test pits, dug to the natural in the westernmost part, revealed that this space had never been used for burials, but probably as a quarry for supplying the red sand which was used to make mortar for the funeral structures. This sand quarry was, therefore, a kind of natural border between a first ensemble around the 'L'-shaped rows of pyramids and a second ensemble to the east, where a test pit was dug in 2001 by our predecessors, yielding two large descendaries. This repartition in burial clusters was not unexpected, but confirmed that the sequence of the burials had not been an even shifting from west to east.

Since it was pointless to dig further south into the sand quarry, the final week was dedicated to opening a new trench on the north of the excavated cluster, in order to find its boundary towards the neighbouring wadi. After a new square was added to the grid-system, more graves were discovered and a new row of small-size pyramids, oriented north-south, was unearthed (Plate 7). At present the superstructures amount to four, including two very small pyramids (1.20m wide). Closer still to the wadi, traces of a pyramid with an internal dome had already been discovered. Two larger pyramids with similar domes (WT 9 and II T 8), but on a much greater scale, were discovered by the first archaeological team in Sector West. This architectural feature is very rare and of the five instances that are known so far, three are located in Sedeinga.

Anthropological study

The anthropological analyses of the bones from Sector II found during the previous excavations and kept in the store was conducted by Agathe Chen.⁴ These bones constitute the remains of 39 individuals. Since many of them were represented by very little material (restricted in some cases to a mandible or a skull), it was difficult to determine such features as sex differentiation or age. However, this first survey yielded some significant elements. From these 39 individuals, five could be classified according to their sex (four male and one female), 26 according to their age (12 mature and 14 immature). Some instances of pathologies were noticed (arthrosis, healed fractures, olecranon perforations).

As for the eight tombs fully excavated during the campaign, most of them (descendaries and cavities) contained bones from several individuals:

⁴ For previous anthropological studies of the human remains found in Sedeinga, see Flaczyński and Janot 2006, Janot 1993; 1994; Janot and Cartier 1998; Janot *et al.* 1994; 1995; Tavernier and Janot 1995.



in five cases the gender could be determined (three male and two female). All the age classes were present: [0-1], [1-4], [5-9], [10-14], [15-19], adults (> 20). Generally, immature individuals are more numerous than mature individuals. However, because of the severely disturbed context, one must be prudent in drawing conclusions. Four instances of olecranon perforations were found. Only tomb II T 217 has yielded an undisturbed burial. In the side cavity, the skeleton was found *in situ* inside a wooden coffin. The individual was between 6 and 7.5 year old. The skull exhibits several striae on the frontal and occipital parts, as well as bone necroses distributed all over the dome of the skull. For the time being, the origin of this pathology remains undetermined and will require further study.

Ceramic study

The material from the previous campaigns in Sector II that is kept in the stores will be studied during the next season and integrated in the general study of Sector II of the necropolis.⁵ The first step of the ceramic study conducted by Romain David and Marie Evina was to establish a typology of the Meroitic fabrics by using all the sherds coming from the surface of our excavations. At least 15 fabrics can be distinguished but some of them are only represented by one sherd. The main part of the collection falls into four groups, namely Meroitic Fineware (seven fabrics), Wheel-made quite fine common ware (three fabrics), Wheel-made coarse ware (one fabric) and Handmade ware (four fabrics). The discovery context of the ceramics coming from the surface and the tombs was completely disturbed. Some Egyptian, Napatan and Christian intrusive material can be explained easily by the proximity of the Temple of Tiyi, of the Napatan tombs and the Christian church. Nevertheless, the scarcity of the material (*c.* 800 sherds making up approximately 100 forms) confirms the relative poverty of this part of the cemetery.

The second step was to describe and draw the diagnostic sherds in order to create a preliminary typology. Forty-one different forms were drawn during this season, including the famous long-necked bottles, fine classical Meroitic tumblers and incense-burners. The material used for funerals in Sedeinga was of types common in Nubia during the Meroitic period. The forms, motifs and wares have attested parallels in other necropolises such as Missiminia or Sai (8-B-5.A) and can, therefore, be regarded as part of a homogeneous regional material. For instance, vine scroll motifs on a long-necked bottle found on the surface of II T 212 (Figure 3) can be paralleled with a bottle found at Missiminia.⁶ If proximity of forms and motifs might be interpreted as evidence for the contemporaneity of the material, it seems obvious that

⁵ Part of the ceramic and glass material from Sedeinga has been studied in Berger and Drieux 1997; Berger el Naggat 1999; Bresciani and Silvano 1992; Brill 1991; Leclant 1971c; 1973; 1975; 1985; 1988, Reinold 2003; Wildung 1997.

⁶ See Vila 1982, XIII, 80, fig. 76.3.

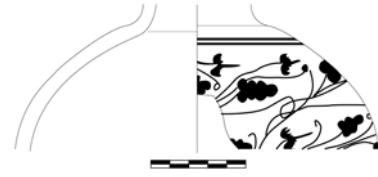


Figure 3. A sherd from a long-necked bottle with vine-scroll decoration (scale 1:4).

Sedeinga will provide ceramologists with new bases for a more accurate chronology. Ceramic chronology in the later phases of the Kingdom of Kush is still in its infancy, so that we cannot accurately date the material excavated during this season. However, a date between the 1st and the 3rd century AD seems secure.

Epigraphic study⁷

The first stela (II T 212s1) comprises eight lines of texts engraved between ruled lines under a lunette depicting the usual winged sun-disk with *uraei* (Figures 5 and 6). It seems that three lines are lost, of which one must have included the end of the text. Remains of two additional lines left blank were found on two small fragments which were too fragile to be stuck together with the rest of the stela. The text can be dated on an epigraphic basis to the second part of the 2nd century AD (*Transitional C*, Rilly 2007, 348). After cleaning and restoration, the signs were found to have been filled with red pigment which was well preserved on parts of the stela. Following the extended invocation to Isis and Osiris, the text gives the name and filiation of the deceased: “This is Takatelito, begotten of a *petedew* in Sasai, born of Nalikaye”. The title of the deceased is added: “he/she was *semte* of Isis”. The text ends with the usual benedictions: “May you feed him/her with plentiful bread, [may you offer him/her] a good meal” (the part of the second sentence which is missing is here reconstructed). Curiously enough, it seems to be the first usual benediction “May you give him/her plentiful water”, which was originally missing.

The name of the deceased, Takatelito (written *Tketelito* < *tk-te-li-se-l-o*),⁸ means “he/she belongs to the Beloved”. “The Beloved” might be the name or the epithet of a deity. The name of the father is not given, only his title, *petedew*, is mentioned. This is of course a variant spelling of the title *petedew* which was born by Natamakhora on a stela and a lintel from West Sector at Sedeinga (REM 1090 and 1091), engraved slightly later. Natamakhora was “*petedew* in Sasai” and “*petedew* in Qar”. An Egyptian origin for this title is very probable but it resembles Demotic personal names and not any Demotic known title. The locality named Sasai (written *Syje*) is unknown and occurs only here and in Natamakhora’s texts. It has been confused by earlier scholars with Sai (*Sye*)

⁷ For previous publication of Meroitic texts from Sedeinga, see Carrier 2001; Heyler 1964; 1965; Leclant and Berger el Naggat 1998; Priese 1997.

⁸ See Rilly 2007, 415-420 for the application of Griffith’s law (*se + l > ð*), Rilly 2010, 91-92 for *tk* “love”.

because the first *S* is damaged in REM 1091. In the present stela, the name is perfectly clear. It is tempting to equate this place-name with modern Jebel Sese and the neighbouring city of Sesebi (< Sese + bi ?)⁹ but no Meroitic settlement has been discovered so far in this place.

The title given to Takatelito is “*semte* of Isis”. The word *semte* is of unknown meaning, although it is attested at Sedeinga – and nowhere else – on the lintel of a woman found in II T 83 (REM 1281), not very far from the present stela. As it is applied to a woman, it is not clear if the word actually describes an administrative position. The connection with Isis might be a weaker one such as “sister of Isis”,¹⁰ possibly describing a person devoted to the goddess, but not belonging to her official cult. However, this might be a clue as to Takatelito’s gender: this individual was probably a woman.

The second text (II T 215s1) is just a fragment of the original stela, which was probably as long (the beginning and the end of the text are preserved) but four times wider in the bottom part (Figure 7). A first line occurs above the first visible signs, but the area of the written field is so narrow that no letters are preserved. The right-hand edge is probably original as there are no cut signs and the syllabic segmentation is correct. Like the previous stela, it is written and engraved with care. It seems to be a bit later, around the beginning of the 3rd century AD. Only parts of the following words can be read: “[O]si[r]is”, “bor[n of]”, “she was the ...”, “wife of the ...”, “she was the ...”, “may you...plentiful”. The word *sem* in line 6 is very likely used as the main noun in a genitive group, where it follows a genitive noun with article added. In that case, “[she was the] wife of a...” is the most probable reconstruction and gives a valuable indication of the gender of the deceased.

Conclusions

Since the large cemeteries of Lower Nubia have been flooded by the Nubian lake, Sedeinga is one of the few necropolises that can still enable archaeologists to understand the successive developmental steps of a Meroitic cemetery. Previously it was thought that the Sedeinga necropolis developed uniformly from west to east, the earliest burials being located west of the camel track and the most recent (apart from sporadic reuse of earliest graves) being located on the fringe of the low track passing alongside the Temple of Tiyi. One of the chief results of this campaign is a new hypothesis about the development of the necropolis. It seems to have grown not from west to east, but in separate clusters comprising one or two “patron pyramids”, around which rows of satellite monuments of smaller scale were erected, along

with simple graves lacking superstructures. The development of these clusters was not necessarily successive: several clusters are very probably contemporaneous, as indicated by the palaeography of texts found in different parts of the necropolis. The stela found on the surface of II T 212, for instance, was engraved around the same time as the famous Natamakhora’s funerary texts found in the West Sector (REM 1090, 1091, 1116) or texts found in other parts of Sector II (II T 83, REM 1281). This statement is not without consequence for the planned excavations during the next seasons. Instead of an even west-east trench, we shall try to uncover the boundaries of the present cluster and to progress to the next cluster located on the west.

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⁹ For Meroitic *pi* (pronounced /bi/), presumably “place”, see Rilly 2010, 371 (*Abore-pi* “place of the elephant”, Meroitic name of Musawwarat) and Rilly forthcoming, III, 2 (*tele-pi* / *tele-pe* “grain jar, large amphora”, lit. “place of the grain”).

¹⁰ The word *semte* might be derived from *sem-te* = “child of the wife”, cf. *kadi-te*, etymologically “child of the woman” meaning “sister” (Rilly 2010, 358-360, 513).



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Colour plate R1 1. Sedeinga. The zone excavated in 2009 (Western part): 1. Row of pyramids west-east, 2. Row of pyramids north-south, 3. Tombs excavated in 2009, 4. Sand quarry, border of the funerary cluster, 5. Top of kom marking the neighbouring funerary cluster in the east.

Colour plate R3 7. Sedeinga. The zone excavated in 2009 (eastern part): 1. Row of pyramids west-east, 2. Row of pyramids north-south, 3. New pyramid group, 4. Remains of a small pyramid with internal domed chamber.



Colour plate R2 2. Sedeinga. Blue-glazed faience amulet found on the surface of the excavated zone (II S001).

