

An Elite Meroitic Cemetery at Sai Island

Francigny Vincent

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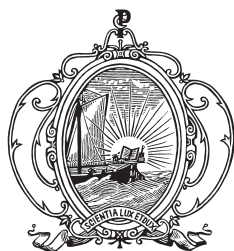
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THE FOURTH CATARACT AND BEYOND

Proceedings of the 12th International Conference for Nubian Studies

edited by

Julie R. ANDERSON and Derek A. WELSBY



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CONTENTS

CONTENTS	v
CONTRIBUTORS	xv
PREFACE	xxiii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xxv
ABBREVIATIONS	xxvii

INTRODUCTION

YUSUF FADL HASAN and Derek A. WELSBY Opening Session	1
SALAH MOHAMED AHMED An Introduction to the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project (MDASP).....	5

THE FOURTH CATARACT AND BEYOND - MAIN PAPERS

PREHISTORY

Piotr OSYPIŃSKI Prehistory of the Fourth Cataract	9
Mathieu HONEGGER Recent Advances in Our Understanding of Prehistory in Northern Sudan	19
Donatella USAI Recent Advances in Understanding the Prehistory of Central Sudan	31
Maria Carmela GATTO Recent Advances in the Understanding of Nubian Prehistory in Lower Nubia, Upper Egypt and the Deserts	45

THE KERMA PERIOD

Henryk PANER Kerma Culture in the Fourth Cataract of the Nile.....	53
Charles BONNET Forty Years Research on Kerma Cultures	81

Brigitte GRATIEN Kerma North of the Third Cataract	95
---	----

Dominique VALBELLE International Relations between Kerma and Egypt	103
---	-----

THE KUSHITE PERIOD

SALAH MOHAMED AHMED Kushites at the Fourth Cataract	111
--	-----

Vincent RONDOT The Island of Meroe	119
---	-----

Angelika LOHWASSER Kush and her Neighbours beyond the Nile Valley	125
--	-----

THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Bogdan ŻURAWSKI The Fourth Cataract in the Medieval Period	135
---	-----

Włodzimierz GODLEWSKI The Kingdom of Makuria	155
---	-----

David N. EDWARDS Medieval Nobadia	171
--	-----

Derek A. WELSBY The Kingdom of Alwa	183
--	-----

THE ISLAMIC PERIOD

ABDELRAHMAN ALI MOHAMMED The Islamic Period in the Fourth Cataract	201
---	-----

INTISAR SOGHAYROUN ELZEIN Islamic Archaeology in Northern Sudan	209
--	-----

Michael MALLINSON The Red Sea Littoral since the Arrival of Islam	217
--	-----

YUSUF FADL HASAN The Islamic Sudan and the Outside World, c. 1317-1821	227
---	-----

REPORTS AND RESEARCH PAPERS**PREHISTORY**

Elena A. A. GARCEA The Evolution from Large Social Units with Loose Networks into Small Social Units with Tight Networks from the Khartoum Variant to the Abkan and the Pre-Kerma at Sai Island	235
Sandro SALVATORI, Donatella USAI, MOHAMED FAROUG ABDELRAHMAN, Antonietta DI MATTEO, Paola IACUMIN, Veerle LINSELE and MONGEDA KHALEB MAGZOUB Archaeology at el-Khiday: New Insight on the Prehistory and History of Central Sudan	243
Andrea ZERBONI The Geoarchaeological Contribution to the el-Salha Project: From Site to Landscape at el-Khiday (Central Sudan).....	259
Tina JAKOB A Bioarchaeological Appraisal of the Human Skeletal Remains from el-Khiday 2, Central Sudan.....	271
ABDELRAHIM M. KHABIR Typological and Technological Examinations of Neolithic Pottery from Khartoum Province, Sudan	279
AZHARI MUSTAFA SADIG Child Burials: A Funerary Practice in the Middle Nile Region. Evidence from the Late Neolithic Site of es-Sour	285
Przemek BOBROWSKI, Agnieszka CZEKAJ-ZASTAWNY and Romuald SCHILD Gebel el-Muqaddas (site E-06-4). The Early Neolithic Tumuli from Nabta Playa (Western Desert, Egypt)	293
HEBA-TALLAH A. A. IBRAHIM Megalithic Architecture and the Nubian Desert.....	303

KERMA AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURES

George HERBST and Stuart Tyson SMITH Pre-Kerma Transition at the Nile Fourth Cataract: First Assessments of a Multi-component, Stratified Prehistoric Settlement in the UCSB/ASU Salvage Concession	311
Magdalena WŁODARSKA Kerma Burials in the Fourth Cataract Region – Three Seasons of Excavations at Shemkhiya	321
Geoff EMBERLING, Bruce B. WILLIAMS, Megan INGVOLDSTAD and Thomas R. JAMES Peripheral Vision: Identity at the Margins of the Early Kingdom of Kush	329
Enrico DIRMINTI Between Kerma and Avaris: The First Kingdom of Kush and Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period	337
Pernille BANGSGAARD Nubian Faunal Practices – Exploring the C-Group “Pastoral Ideal” at Nine Cemeteries	347

Petra WESCHENFELDER Linking the Eastern Desert and the Nile Valley: Pan-Grave People from the Late Middle Kingdom to the Early New Kingdom	357
PHARAONIC	
Florence DOYEN Sai Island New Kingdom Town (Northern Sudan): 3 rd and 4 th Seasons (2009-2010)	367
Giulia D'ERCOLE, Giacomo ERAMO and Italo M. MUNTONI Archaeometric Approaches to Ceramic Manufacture and Traditions at Sai Island, Northern Sudan	377
Lauriane MIELLÉ Nubian Traditions on the Ceramics Found in the Pharaonic Town on Sai Island	387
Giacomo CAVILLIER Soleb 2010 Project: Amenhotep III's Fortified Complex Research	393
W. Vivian DAVIES A Statue of Amenhotep III Rediscovered.....	399
Kate SPENCE and Pamela ROSE Fieldwork at Sesebi 2010	409
Philippe RUFFIEUX Early 18 th Dynasty Pottery Found in Kerma (Dokki Gel).....	417
Stuart Tyson SMITH and Michele R. BUZON Colonial Entanglements: "Egyptianization" in Egypt's Nubian Empire and the Nubian Dynasty.....	431
Doris PEMLER Looking for Nubians in Egypt. Taking a Look at the Iconographic Evidence from the 1 st Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom	443
Natalie A. POMERANTSEVA Images of the Foreigners in Egyptian Art	451
Neal SPENCER Amara West: Considerations on Urban Life in Colonial Kush	457
Michaela BINDER Cultural Traditions and Transitions During the New Kingdom Colonial Period and Its Aftermath – Recent Discoveries from the Cemeteries of Amara West	487
Danièle MICHAUX-COLOMBOT Pitfall Concepts in the Round of 'Nubia': Ta-Sety, Nehesy, Medja, Maga and Punt Revisited.....	507
Alfredo CASTIGLIONI and Angelo CASTIGLIONI À la recherche de la terre d'Amou.....	523

KUSHITE

EL-SAMANI AL-NASRI MOHAMMED AHMED The Emergence of Kush.....	531
Jean REVEZ The Role of the Kings' Brothers in the Transmission of Royal Power in Ancient Egypt and Kush: A Cross-Cultural Study	537
Friederike JESSE On the Borders of Kushite Power – The Gala Abu Ahmed Fortress in Lower Wadi Howar, Northern Sudan	545
Michael H. ZACH The Army and Military Dictatorship in Meroe?	557
Stanley M. BURSTEIN The Satrap Stela and the Struggle for Lower Nubia	573
Jeremy POPE Meroitic Diplomacy and the Festival of Entry.....	577
Maria Iride PASQUALI On the Traces of Nubians: Notes on the Relations between Romans and Meroites.....	583
IKHLAS ABDUL LATIEF The K3 Symbol in Kushite Civilization	587
Amarillis POMPEI Delivery of Nubian Royal Insignia: The Crowns.....	591
Katarina ALDENHOVEN Kushite Barque Stands	601
Julie R. ANDERSON and SALAH MOHAMED AHMED Early Kushite Royal Statues at Dangeil, Sudan	613
László TÖRÖK Quality, Style, and Nubianness. Prolegomena to a History of Meroitic Sculpture.....	621
MURTADA BUSHARA MOHAMMED The Possible Royal Tomb of Eltameer Merowe	635
Julia BUDKA Egyptian Impact on Pot-Breaking Ceremonies at el-Kurru? A Re-examination	641
Brigitte BALANDA Protecting the Mummy – A Reinterpretation of <i>Shabtis</i> in Napatan Funerary Customs	655
Timothy KENDALL Reused Relief Blocks of Piankhy from B 900: Toward a Decipherment of the Osiris Cult at Jebel Barkal	663

Svetlana BERSINA† Sabazios dans les pays de la vallée du Nil. Variétés régionales de l’image et du culte.....	687
Emanuele M. CIAMPINI and Grażyna BĄKOWSKA-CZERNER Meroitic Kingship and Water: The Case of Napata (B2200).....	695
Tracey SWEET, Julie R. ANDERSON, SALAH MOHAMED AHMED and Satoko TANIMOTO Conservation of an Amun Temple in the Sudan	703
Karla KROEPER Excavation of “Offering Chapel 360” in Naga	711
Paweł WOLF, Ulrike NOWOTNICK and Catharine HOF The Meroitic Urban Town of Hamadab in 2010.....	719
Eugenio FANTUSATI, Eleonora KORMYSHEVA and Svetlana MALYKH Survey in Abu Erteila: Preliminary Results.....	739
Richard A. LOBBAN Preliminary Findings at Abu Erteila: A Meroitic and Early Christian Site in Sudan	759
Michel BAUD† Downtown Muweis – A Progress Report (2007-2011).....	763
Marc MAILLOT The Palace of Muweis in the Shendi Reach: A Comparative Approach	783
Vincent FRANCIGNY An Elite Meroitic Cemetery at Sai Island	797
MAHMOUD SULIMAN BASHIR The Archaeological Material from the Meroitic Cemetery at Berber	805
Tsubasa SAKAMOTO Chronology of Meroitic Graves in Northern Sudan: Agency, Power and Society	809
Serge FENEUILLE, Jean-Pierre LETOURNEUX and Marie BOUCHAR Archaeological Information Extracted from a Comparative Study of Samples of Mortar Collected on Various Ancient Monuments in the Nile Valley between the Third and the Sixth Cataracts.....	827
MEDIEVAL	
Marek CHŁODNICKI The “Royal” Tumulus at Hagar el-Beida.....	833
Brenda J. BAKER Tracking Transitions in the Fourth Cataract Region of el-Ginefab: Results of the Arizona State University Fieldwork, 2007-2009	841

Eugen STROUHAL Anthropology of Wadi Qitna and Kalabsha South.....	857
Artur OBLUSKI Rank-Size Rule in Nubian Settlement Systems	867
William Y. ADAMS The Eparch at Meinarti.....	875
Bogdan ŻURAWSKI Meroitic to Medieval Occupation Upriver from Dongola. Excavations at Banganarti and Selib in 2010.....	887
Mariusz DRZEWIECKI Banganarti – Fortifications	901
Marta OSYPIŃSKA Animals in the Economy of Christian Makuria	909
Małgorzata MARTENS-CZARNECKA Nubian Representations of Nativity Discovered in the Monastery in Old Dongola	917
Magdalena WOZNIAK Royal Iconography: Contribution to the Study of Costume.....	929
Dobrochna ZIELIŃSKA The Iconography of Power – The Power of Iconography: The Nubian Royal Ideology and Its Expression in Wall Painting	943
Adam ŁAJTAR A Survey of Christian Textual Finds from Gebel Adda in the Collections of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto	951
Giovanni RUFFINI May God Increase Your Years: Unpublished Old Nubian Correspondence from Qasr Ibrim	961
Grzegorz OCHAŁA Old Nubian Lists of Goods and Money: A Preliminary Presentation	971
Claudia NÄSER and Alexandros TSAKOS From Bits and Pieces. A Corpus of Medieval Manuscripts from the Humboldt University (H.U.N.E.) Concession in the Fourth Nile Cataract	977
Alexandros TSAKOS and Henriette HAFSAAS-TSAKOS A Note on the Medieval Period of Sai Island.....	985
Robin SEIGNOBOS Nubia and Nubians in Medieval Latin Culture. The Evidence of Maps (12 th -14 th Century).....	989

ISLAMIC TO MODERN

NADA BABEKIR MOHAMMED Fangool Archaeological Site: A Brief Note	1005
RAGEH Z. MOHAMED Bani Ady, Darb el-Arbain's Last Station between Upper Egypt and Nubia in the Islamic period.....	1009
Alex DE VOOGT The Introduction of Mancala to Sai Island	1017
HAIFA MOHAMMED HASSAN ELTAYEB Sudanese Beautification Ornaments between the Past and the Present	1021
Armgard GOO-GRAUER House Decoration by Nubian Women Prior to 1964 Resettlement	1025
Anne M. JENNINGS The Changing Face of Tourism in West Aswan Village	1027
Costanza DE SIMONE Perceptions of Nubia in Museum Collections and Displays	1031
Salomé ZURINAGA The Preservation of the Documentary Heritage of the 'Nubian Campaign' kept at the Spanish National Archaeological Museum, Madrid, Spain	1035

MULTI-PERIOD

KABBASHI HUSSEIN GISSEMA The Merowe Dam Salvage Archaeological Project (Sudan).....	1049
FAWZI HASSAN BAKHEIT Rock Drawing Studies: Four Seasons In The Middle Nile Region	1057
Joanna THEN-OBLUSKA The Code of the Hidden Beads – From the Kerma to the Islamic Period According to the Fourth Cataract Material from the Gdańsk Archaeological Museum Expedition Excavations.....	1069
Ross THOMAS Changing Societies in the Fourth Cataract: Identity Displayed through Ceramic Use and Consumption Practices.....	1091
YAHIA FADL TAHIR Archaeology and Palaeoecology of el-Ga'ab Basin	1099
ALI OSMAN MOHAMED SALIH Archaeology and Settlement in the Third Cataract Region. Abu Fatma: A Nubian Settlement from the Kerma Period to Modern Times	1107

Margaret JUDD	
Growing Up in Gabati: An Overview of Health	1115
SIDDIG BABIKER AHMED	
The Archaeological and Ethnographical Reconnaissance in the Sabaloka Area (Western Bank of the Nile, North of Omdurman District)	1125
Tim KARBERG	
Rock Art from Wadi Abu Dom. Recent Discoveries of the W.A.D.I. Project (Münster/Germany)	1135
KHIDIR ADAM EISA	
The Recent Archaeological Survey and Salvage Excavations on the Eastern Bank of the White Nile, 8 th Season – 2009	1143
Andrea MANZO	
Beyond the Fourth Cataract. Perspectives for Research in Eastern Sudan.....	1149
YOUSIF ELOBEID ELSHEIKH SALIH	
GIS in Archaeology	1159

LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

Claude RILLY	
Language and Ethnicity in Ancient Sudan	1169
Herman BELL	
A World Heritage Alphabet: The Role of Old Nubian in the Revitalization of the Modern Nubian Languages	1189

AN ELITE MEROITIC CEMETERY AT SAI ISLAND

VINCENT FRANCIGNY

Throughout the literature dedicated to antiquity and the analysis of its social components (Bowersock *et al.* 1999), authors have always confronted the difficulty of defining the concept of elite (Brown 2000, 321; Los and Nawotka 2005) without falling into the modern economic idea of the ‘ruling class’ analysis proposed by Marxist theory. In an effort to address the difficulty, scholars such as M. I. Finley have pointed out that ‘elite’ remains an ‘admirably vague word’ (Finley 1973, 51) regarding the question of social status in antiquity, doubtlessly hiding our partial ignorance of the deep complexity of some ancient societies. This assumption naturally brought up another approach by which to define an elite group; which, in the case of a Meroitic community who lived far from the capital and the central power, could be based almost entirely on archaeological evidence.

That is why we propose here, through the example of a Meroitic necropolis on Sai Island, a description of the elements that could characterize the existence of such a group within the population settled in Middle Nubia. This study is part of a general research on funerary customs in the region, involving recent fieldwork resumed on Sai after a five-year gap following the death of Francis Geus, former director of the French mission. It also includes excavation records and analyses of some older material stored in the dig house and in the Sudan National Museum in Khartoum for decades; all indicating that at least one of the five Meroitic cemeteries discovered on the island has a high status profile.

THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

Located several kilometres south of the ‘Batn el-Hagar’, upstream of the Second Cataract, Sai is one of the largest islands in the Middle Nile valley, more than 10km north-south, and up to 4km east-west. Situated only about 20km north of Sedeinga, a site where several hundred Meroitic burials have been found but all traces of settlement seem to have vanished, Sai was in fact in the middle of a strategic area containing a number of Meroitic sacred monuments and settlements (Figure 1). From south to north, first comes the site of Abudiya, where a cemetery (K 99) was found during a survey conducted by the SFDAS in 1978 (Geus 1979,

18). A few graves were excavated, all with the general characteristics of Meroitic burials. A few kilometres farther north, another typical Meroitic cemetery was discovered in Koyekka el-Gamaa (Vila 1978b, 37), facing the centre of the island. Also opposite Sai, but on the other bank of the Nile, the site of Irki Saab has a small Meroitic necropolis of about 30 graves, without any visible superstructures. Back to the east bank, the highest mountain in the area, Jebel Abri seems to also have been a place of devotion during the Meroitic period, as a graffito of a Meroitic king is engraved there, associated with several representations of offering tables (Arkell 1950, 32; Vercoutter 1956, 81; Vila 1978a, 126). A similar situation is known on the west bank at the nearby Jebel Umm Rowag (Welsby and Welsby Sjöström 2006). Facing the northern part of the island, another Meroitic cemetery was found on the site of Dambo (Vila 1978b, 50).

At some distance in the curve of the river running to the east, three other Meroitic sites exist, which used to

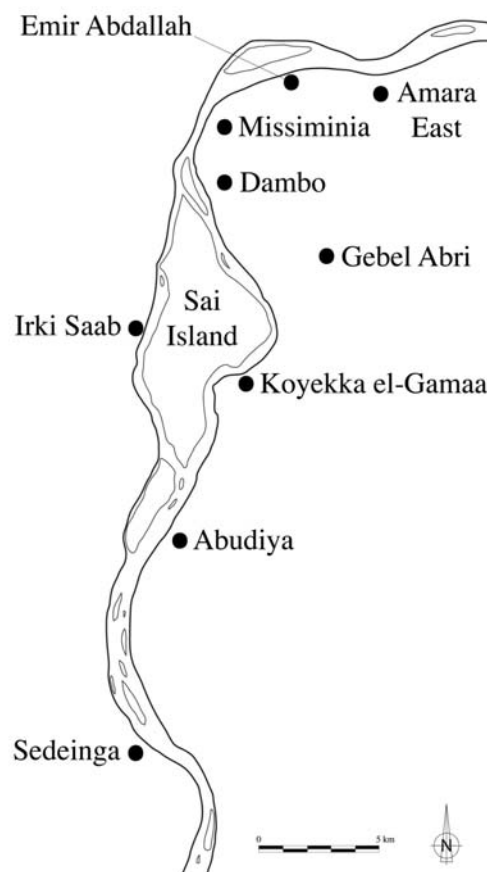


Figure 1. Map of the Sai region (V. Francigny).

be on the right bank, all now covered by the extensions of the modern town of Abri. A few hundred metres north of Sai is Missiminia, well known as one of the largest cemeteries in the region. Its Meroitic necropolis was excavated *in extenso* (Vila 1982), with 293 grave substructures explored and three bases of pyramidal superstructures discovered. Not only on account of its size, but also by its contents, Missiminia is the closest parallel to the Meroitic necropolises of Sai Island that can be found in Middle Nubia. Next to it is the site of Emir Abdallah, one of the very rare known examples of a cemetery that belongs to the early Meroitic period (Fernandez 1984). Finally there is the site of Amara East with its necropolis and temple, strategically positioned during the 1st century AD upstream of the first rapids of the 'Batn el-Hagar', which opens to the unstable Lower Nubia area.

Sai Island was not only connected to this dense network of settlements along the banks of the Nile, but also to the nearby hinterland. This has been proven by regular discoveries of Meroitic graves in the vicinity of the actual town of Abri and around the jebel, as a result of the gold fever which has spread all over Nubia. A good example of these random discoveries is a copper-alloy arrowhead that bears a Meroitic inscription (Plate 1), probably that of a personal name.¹

Finally, it is imperative to mention that we cannot understand the importance of Sai Island during the Meroitic period without noting the presence upstream of the major site of Sedeinga. If Sedeinga controlled the west bank and the desert roads beyond while Amara had the same role on the east, Sai was possibly involved with the traffic on the Nile. This might have been a decisive factor allowing the development of a powerful community on Sai Island, with administrative and economic roles.



Plate 1. Copper-alloy arrowhead with Meroitic inscription (V. Francigny).

¹ To our knowledge, this is the only Meroitic inscription known on an arrowhead. The closest parallel is another inscription found on a spearhead at Qustul (Emery and Kirwan 1938, pl. 50 and 116; Monneret de Villard 1960, 113).

A RELIGIOUS CENTRE

The recent study (Francigny *forth.*) of some architectural blocks in the remains of the ancient town which, since their discovery, were erroneously thought to be of Egyptian origin, has proven the existence of a monumental Meroitic temple on the island. Those blocks were mostly represented by fragments of columns, bearing decoration of Nile gods accompanied by animals, indicating major Ptolemaic influences coming from Lower Nubian temples such as Dakka. However, the most interesting element was, by far, a fragmentary abacus, on which three bases of cartouches could be seen. Based on them, it was possible to reconstruct the name of the royal couple Natakamani and Amanitore (Figure 2), while the third name ending in 'ror' could be associated with the prince Arakakhataror, well known from the scenes of the Amun temple at Naqa. This discovery enabled us to associate some other decorated fragments stored in the dig house with the Meroitic period. One of them, showing the detail of an *ankh* in the hand of a person (Plate 2), was carved with deep and sharp angles, very similar to the relief style applied on the monuments of the Butana area. It is the first element of wall decoration ever found.

During the excavation of the town (Azim 1975; Doyen 2009), the presence of an important Meroitic

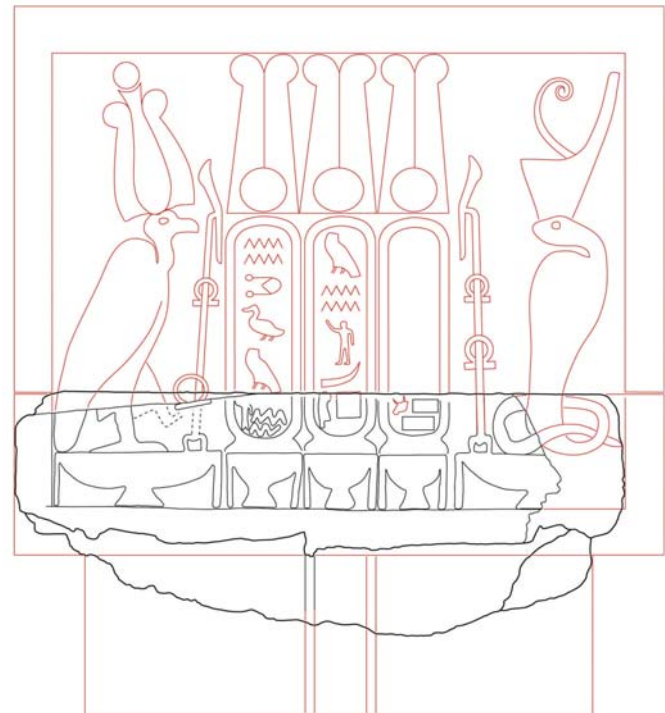


Figure 2. Abacus with Meroitic royal names (V. Francigny).



Plate 2. Fragment of the decoration of the Meroitic temple (V. Francigny).

layer was confirmed. Several structures from that period were discovered, with some of them related to high-ranking individuals. Also, some artefacts could be associated with a religious context, such as a painted fragmentary head made of burnt clay (Plate 3) that could be inserted on a stick.

These examples clearly demonstrate that there was a Meroitic settlement on Sai Island where an important religious centre was active, at least from the mid-1st century AD. A religious elite might have been thus settled on the island, overseeing the practice of worship and controlling the administration of the temple's economic activities.



Plate 3. Three views of a painted Meroitic head (V. Francigny).

THE MEROITIC NECROPOLISES

While only one Meroitic settlement was located on top of the New Kingdom fortified town, numerous funerary remains were found on the island, giving us a much better understanding of the population that used to live there and of its distribution.

In 1976, a few isolated Meroitic burials were discovered by Jean Vercoutter, providing rich material despite very destructive looting activities (Vercoutter 1979; Geus 1978). It was only 20 years later, in 1996, that Francis Geus (1998, 1999) finally found two real cemeteries, both in the northern part of the island near the ancient town. In 2001, the main cemetery was also located (Geus 2002) by identifying a wavy surface that corresponds to hundreds of Meroitic burials next to a large Post-Meroitic tumuli field. In the same year, a fifth location was also confirmed, for the first time in the southern part of the island.

Each site was partially investigated, but only one of them (recorded as 8-B-5.A) presented remains of large funerary monuments and graves (Geus 2006; Francigny 2009; 2010a; 2010b; Lefebvre 2007). This so-called 'Elite cemetery' was different for many reasons. First of all, it was strategically located on the top of a hill-ock, only 70m behind the ancient settlement, meaning that its monuments were always visible from there. Second, the size of the necropolis was less than 100m long² and 60m wide, and its density of structures was low. They indicate that instead of extending the cemetery with new graves for each generation, the tombs were only a few in number and reused several times over centuries. Being buried there, so close to the living, must have been a privilege of some powerful families that had an influence on the community's destiny and needed to express it even after death. A detailed plan of the excavated area (Figure 3) also reveals that the superstructures were organized with a hierarchy, in which small Meroitic graves cluster around larger ones; a pattern that has already been seen in many other cemeteries in Nubia during the Meroitic period, possibly indicating familial relationships.

A closer look at the structures themselves also supports the idea that an elite group was buried in 8-B-5.A. All the vestiges are pyramids built with mud bricks, except one whose base is made of schist. Only a few courses of bricks have survived from the original monuments, but in many cases that was enough to

² Even if the southern boundary is still unknown, it should not extend farther than tens of metres, where an older excavation has revealed the existence of a large Christian cemetery.

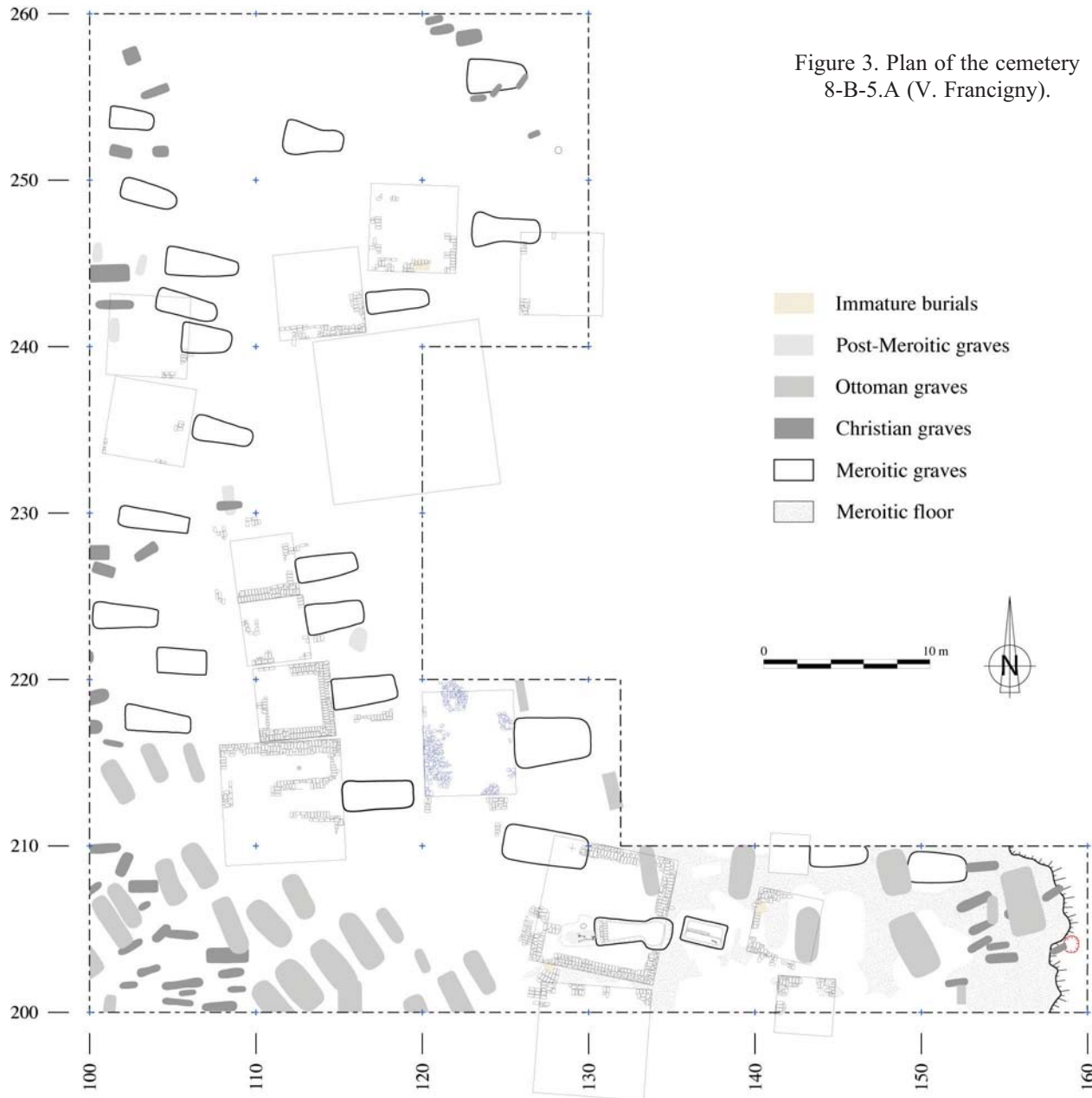


Figure 3. Plan of the cemetery 8-B-5.A (V. Francigny).

deduct an approximate size of the construction, often reaching up to 10m high. Many graves of immature individuals were found beneath them, one of the well-known Meroitic funerary traditions for non-royal burials.

The centre of the cemetery was dominated by a row of very large pyramids, one of which, the biggest ever found in the region, measures 10m per side. Some of them had a foundation trench in order to allow construction directly on a strong layer of silt. Many also had traces of supporting walls inside of their structure.

Most of the tombs have a sloping entrance ramp leading to an axial cavity. Space between each descender was always important and was intentionally left empty, while in general it was filled with late burials in the other cemeteries. The fact that even after decades it was still forbidden to dig a grave next to one of

‘famous’ ancestors indicates that the rules applying to the necropolis were strong and enforced up to the end, most likely because of the origin of its population and the official nature of the place.

Another architectural detail also makes 8-B-5.A different: the presence of painting on the monuments. Drops of red paint were discovered on the surface of the first mud-brick courses of the pyramids, proving that they were not entirely covered with plaster but most likely only on the upper part. Drops could have fallen on the lower courses of exposed bricks while workers were painting on the plaster covering the upper part of the monuments. This plaster, with a high concentration of red pigments, is often found during excavation, hardened like stone on the ground after having dissolved over time.

The substructures also have a high status profile, with a size exceeding by far any others found on the island during the same period. Moreover, the architecture of the deep entrances, sometimes carefully made with stairs cut into the earth (Plate 4), and associated with elaborate blocking systems, is clearly exceptional when compared with the usual features of a Meroitic grave.



Plate 4. Entrance of a Meroitic grave with door partly opened (V. Francigny).

ARTEFACTUAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL REMAINS

As often in Nubia, all the graves were heavily plundered during the Meroitic and Post-Meroitic periods, but not after. For that reason, very few individuals were found *in situ* with their deposits. Bones, funerary material and wood residues from the coffin were often mixed in a thick layer of sediment hardened by rains, creating a high level of confusion for archaeologists. Remains of many late blocking systems were also found, built with small slabs of schist and based on thick layers of sand, indicating that after being plundered, the graves were left open and naturally filled with sand. Multiple burials were the rule (Billy 1987), and often, if the space was sufficient, the grave was not cleaned or emptied prior to a new funeral.

In every grave, we discovered shallow holes or trenches dug on the floor of the tomb chamber, some with traces of wood in them. They indicate the existence of a wooden funerary bed and installations to receive large rounded-based ceramics. The primary burial seems to have always been the richest, since later inhumations never provide enough material to take advantage of the great space that originally existed in the cavity.

Furthermore, grave goods that survived the plundering suggest the presence of a rich community. Although mostly discovered in a very disturbed context, they include a significant amount of fine Meroitic pottery. The majority of the discoveries are Late Meroitic forms (David 2009), with a wide range of forms and fabrics from imported *lekythoi* to local long-necked jars (Plate 5). An exceptional find was a *Kerma Classique* annular base plate (Plate 6), reused in a Meroitic grave as part of the funerary deposit. Its excellent condition indicates that it could not have normally survived during the millennium which separates Kerma from Meroe, meaning that the Meroites must have taken it from the only stable environment known on the island for this kind of artefact: a Kerma grave.

First targeted by robbers, ornaments are rare but luxury goods are still well represented by a glass vessel, ivory decorations (Francigny 2008) and wooden boxes or *kohl* pots. On the surface of the site, the material associated with the pyramids and their chapels also reflects the dominant position of the population. *Ba* statues, offering tables and inscribed stelae (Rilly 2007, 2008) are thus all represented in the cemetery 8-B-5.A.

The human remains from these tombs also reflect the general wealth of the population buried there. The



Plate 5.
Long-necked jar.



Plate 6. Kerma plate.

majority of the individuals were put in a supine position with the head to the west. A few were wrapped in a shroud made of linen according to the Egyptian tradition, and sometimes painted with scenes corresponding to a well-known design found in Egypt at the same period, on Roman cartonnage coffins from the oases of Bahariya, Dakhla and Kharga (Riggs 2005, 48). Bodies were often protected by wooden coffins.

There was little trace of trauma and fractures on the bodies. The analysis of the bones revealed a generally healthy population (Le Bailly and Bouchet 2006) with a good protein and iron-rich diet that fits with the other indications of a privileged population.

All the above facts provide several indications that the group buried in cemetery 8-B-5.A on Sai Island was special, a so-called 'elite'. However, the paradox remains that even with all the elements derived from archaeological research on the differences between that minority and the rest of the population, we are still incapable of explaining the nature and the reasons for this distinction. Was the 'elite' of Sai a religious group having responsibilities passed on from generation to generation? Was this 'elite' of local origin or composed of people sent by the central power to administer the region of Sai? We shall await further discoveries and the use of new tools, such as archeogenetic studies, to find answers and slowly define what the criteria were to be members of the social elite in the Meroitic kingdom.

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