

#### Acknowledgement

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# The discovery of the Neolithic in Nubia

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The proper meaning of the term “Neolithic” has been much discussed in the African context during the last decades, although most scholars agree today that it is more necessary than ever to define it carefully before applying it, if it should be applied at all. European-trained prehistorians have been tempted to use this term for the earliest presence of polished stone tools, pottery, cereal agriculture and herding wherever they work. It is clear, however, that this rather outdated concept of “Neolithic” cannot be transferred uncritically from the European or Middle Eastern scenes to the African continent (Sinclair *et al.* 1993: 6-8).

In north-east Africa, where a pastoral component with cattle herding was prominent from the beginning of the Neolithic, there is naturally some lack of concordance between the French and the anglophone terminology. On the whole, however, “Neolithic” is considered equivalent to “food production” in one form or another. As substitutes for or additions to that term there are different and, in most contexts, more precise designations such as “pastoral”, “agricultural” or “agro-pastoral”. Nevertheless, the modern multi-disciplinary emphasis on economy, ecology and settlement strategies is obvious in all camps, while the presence or absence of pottery or of specific lithic technologies, or of traces of long-term habitation are optional. In the spirit of processual archaeology it is essential to continue to analyse, insofar as the available data permits, parameters other than the economic or technological in order to fully understand the transformation from a hunter-gathering to a food producing society (Sinclair *et al.* 1993: 8; Edwards 2004: 56-57).

These issues were not on the agenda when I came to Nubia in April 1960 to take part in the International salvage campaign as a Unesco programme assistant attached to Sudan Antiquities Service and the small team lead by W. Y. Adams. In Nubia up to that time most of the archaeological work and discussions had been centred on the relations between Pharaonic Egypt and the Nubian province. From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the archaeological field strategies had to a large extent been directed towards the finding and ex-

cavating cemeteries and settlements with substantial structural remains apart, of course, from Pharaonic and Late Nubian remains of temples, fortifications and churches. In addition, specialists on the Palaeolithic period like K. S. Sandford and W. J. Arkell (1933) had recorded sequences of lithic industries on the higher formations of the Nile in both Egypt and Nubia, while other missions had documented rock drawings (Dunbar 1941; Myers 1958). What was between the end of the Palaeolithic and the Late Predynastic period was virtually unknown in Nubia, with very few exceptions.

The habitation remains from the Early Nubian period had been much neglected or simply not found. One, but not the only reason for this was of course site destruction by cultivation or flooding, while the funerary remains survived because they were located on higher ground.

It is striking, nevertheless, that in the classic survey publications of Reisner, Firth and Emery & Kirwan there are very few descriptions of Early Nubian habitation remains even when they were found. Reisner's brief account of the "Archaic camp" at cemetery 41 near Meris Markos is an exception (Reisner 1910: 215-18). Upstream from Es Sebuia and the Korosko bend to the Sudanese border only one single habitation site of early date was recorded by the Emery-Kirwan survey, a disturbed occupation layer of an "Archaic settlement" located beneath some New Kingdom tombs on cemetery 172 at El Rîqa not far from the Amada temple. The description of the finds is confined to the following sentence: "...but a number of pots which had been sunk in the flooring were found in position together with four celts of igneous stones." (Emery & Kirwan 1935: 201, fig. 197.) Quite a few C-Group settlements were located in the same reach but only mentioned in passing (Emery & Kirwan 1935, map pl. 63).

Like most prehistorians coming to Nubia in the beginning of the 1960s I was rather badly prepared for the Neolithic. The Early Nubian sequence started with the A-Group (which was seldom called A-Group), a culture that was generally considered to be "Archaic", contemporary with the Early Dynastic period in Egypt. In the Sudanese part of Lower Nubia the A-Group was known from two sites only, a rich cemetery and some habitation remains at Faras West (Griffith 1921) and a small cemetery in Gamai at the beginning of the Second cataract (Bates & Dunham 1927).

Then, in the idyllic Wadi Halfa museum I read two papers published in Kush by the British prehistorian Oliver H. Myers, who had conducted excavations at Abka near the Second cataract in the end of the 1940s when he was attached to the Gordon Memorial College in Khartoum. His main objective was to record the numerous sites with rock carvings in that area. I became especially interested in his description of one site, No. IX, a multiple pothole with lithic material and pottery and with a clearly defined stratigraphy and also some rock drawings that were embedded in the occupation layers (Myers 1958; 1960; Palma di Cesnola 1960).

One could understand from Myers' pioneering work that the extensive Second cataract area as a whole, the largest of its kind along the Nile, with a very special environment, was extremely promising from a prehistoric point of view. The

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1. In 1968 Oliver Myers' notes and analytical charts of the pottery from Sites V and IX in Abka were sent over by Mrs Myers to the Scandinavian Joint Expedition in Uppsala. A few years ago I transferred most of Myers' ceramic data to computer sheets (Excel and FileMaker Pro) in collaboration with Maria Carmela Gatto, who subsequently re-analysed the Abkan pottery in Khartoum, especially from Myers' Site IX. An account of this is under preparation.



**Fig. 1**  
Rock-art in  
the Abkan area.  
From Säve-  
Söderbergh,  
T., Preliminary  
Report of the  
Scandinavian  
Joint Expedition.  
Archaeological  
Investigations  
between Faras  
and Gemai,  
November 1963-  
March 1964,  
Kush 15 (1967-  
1968) : pl. XL.



Scandinavian Joint Expedition subsequently made a complete documentation of the rock drawings in their concession on the east bank – nearly 6000 figures were found in the Abkan area only (**fig. 1**). In 1964 Myers generously handed over his maps, notes, photographs and drawings to the Scandinavians and in this way they were included in the final publication (Hellström & Langballe 1970).<sup>1</sup>



Oliver Myers was the first to recognize and date remains of Neolithic cultures in Nubia. It was a great loss that he was not able to publish his results in a more complete form. When he stayed in Khartoum he actually worked on a book called “Neolithic Nubians”, but had to give it up when he left the Sudan in 1949. He met his premature death in March 1966.

The bulk of the pottery and the lithic assemblages of Myers’ Site IX correspond to what we today call the Khartoum Variant and the Abkan (see below). In addition there were some remains of later occupations on this site and adjacent sites, of A-Group and Middle Nubian origin. Myers had developed a sophisticated system of describing and classifying pottery, a work that he started when he directed the excavations at Armant, the important Predynastic site in Upper Egypt (Mond & Myers 1937). From this publication one can comprehend that he paid special attention to the technical properties of the pottery and that he, in this way, could define differences between the Neolithic ceramic traditions characterized by mineral temper and the later Nubian traditions based on organic temper, typical of the A-Group and C-Group pottery (Nordström 1972: 57).

The other front figure of Sudanese prehistory was of course Anthony J. Arkell, who acted as the first Commissioner of archaeology in the Sudan. His discoveries in the 1940s of the earliest pottery producing cultures in the Khartoum region are well known and the two major publications of his hand, *Early Khartoum* (Arkell 1949) and *Shaheinab* (Arkell 1953) form the foundation of all subsequent research in the Sudan dealing with the transition between hunting-gathering and the early stages of food production. It took twenty years after this pioneering work before any new, substantial results emerged in this field along the Middle Nile. To begin with, the focus was on Nubia, but this time on the Wadi Halfa reach and the Second cataract and the adjacent region to the south, with the imaginative name *Batn-el-Hagar*, Belly of the rocks.

The international salvage campaign of the 1960s became a significant turning point for the archaeology in north-east Africa. It had a strong impetus also for the Neolithic research. The lower Nile valley was no longer the sole kingdom of the Egyptologists. A newsletter of the Sudan Archaeological Research Society from 2003 stated that Nubia was not any longer “perceived as a siteless backwater of prehistoric archaeology”. Scholars with a broad scientific training in archaeology and natural sciences carried out extensive investigations in the area to be flooded and this tradition continued during the following decades further south in Upper Nubia, in the central parts of the Sudan and also in the desert areas especially to the west of the Nile valley (*cf.* the excellent overviews by Midant-Reynes 2000: part III, and Edwards 2004: chap. 3).

The Scandinavian Joint Expedition (SJE) was one of the larger missions in Sudanese Nubia and an experienced team of Nordic archaeologists, many of them prehistorians, took part in the intensive field work during four seasons in 1961-64. Very few had any egyptological training but the whole project was directed by the Swedish egyptologist Torgny Säve-Söderbergh at Uppsala University. Many different types of sites were investigated, rock drawings, habitation areas, churches, and, above all, numerous cemeteries from various periods of the Nubian and Egyptian history.

The results of the Scandinavian efforts were published in nine volumes, some of them double, a work that was finished in 1991. The Early Nubian sites and

find material were described in detail by the present author and, as regards the lithic material, by Randi Haaland (Nordström 1972; Haaland 1972). Another outcome of these excavations is that there are now substantial Nubian collections, true “ambassadors” of the Sudan, at Uppsala in Sweden but also in Denmark, Finland, and Norway, following find divisions and other agreements made between the expedition and the generous Sudanese authorities. One fascinating part of these collections is made up of finds and records from Neolithic habitation sites and cemeteries of A-Group date.

The Combined Prehistoric Expedition (CPE) under the direction of Fred Wendorf and Romuald Schild concentrated on the prehistoric sites. Their concession was unique because it was chronologically rather than geographically confined. The endangered areas on both sides of the river were included and there was a close co-operation between CPE and the other missions working in the region, especially the Scandinavian Joint Expedition. The composition of the staff was perfect for analysing the find material and the ecological settings of the prehistoric remains. The results were published in several substantial volumes (Wendorf 1968; Wendorf & Schild 1976). The pre-ceramic sites excavated by the Scandinavian mission were also analysed and published by a scholar of the CPE team, A.E. Marks (1970).

The third mission important in this context was the Colorado University Expedition that investigated Neolithic sites in Batn el Hagar, the most notable in Wadi Karagan in Murshid (Carlson 1966).

The UNESCO team attached to the Sudan Antiquities Service also recorded a few prehistoric remains during their survey and excavations on the west bank between Faras and Gamai and on both banks further south. Some important Neolithic campsites were found, particularly in Batn-el-Hagar (Mills & Nordström 1966) and in the Second cataract area (Adams & Nordström 1963). A complete description of the latter sites is now under preparation (Nordström forthcoming).

The work in Nubia during the 1960s resulted in a new and comprehensive picture of the Early and Middle Holocene development in Nubia. The recognition of the Nilotic adjustment became the key to the understanding of the processes guiding the transition from hunting-gathering to early food production.

The Combined Prehistoric Expedition made the first detailed analysis of the find material from Neolithic sites in the Wadi Halfa reach and the Second cataract area. Joel Shiner recognised three different pottery-producing entities that preceded the A-Group in Nubia: the Post-Shamarkian, the Khartoum Variant and the Abkan (Shiner 1968a; 1968b). He was the first who actually coined these designations. His work had the emphasis on the lithic material. I followed this up somewhat later with a thorough analysis of the pottery traditions, based mainly on a detailed classification of the technological features, the surface treatment, and the decoration (Nordström 1972: 33-79). The results of Shiner and myself can be briefly summarized as follows. I have tried to put our old data in a wider context especially in view of later research on the Nilotic technocomplex.<sup>2</sup>

2. Find material of the CPE was transferred a few years ago from Dallas to the Dpt. of Ancient Egypt and Sudan at the British Museum. It is kept there under the name of “The Wendorf Collection”. The Neolithic material of the SJE is kept at Museum Gustavianum, Uppsala University, Sweden.

### **The Post-Shamarkian and the Khartoum Variant**

The Post-Shamarkian is still confined to a couple of sites in the Wadi Halfa reach. Although the lithic material from these two sites is rather dissimilar in composition, this entity may be considered as a local counterpart to Khartoum Variant and the Abkan. The pottery that was briefly described by Shiner (c. 200 sherds) has not yet been recovered<sup>3</sup>.

The Khartoum Variant originally consisted of eight sites. Five of these were located in Abka and adjacent areas, the principal one being SJE 428/CPE 1045 at Khor Mousa. Numerous microliths and a moderate proportion of blade tools, with scrapers of Egyptian flint as a typical inclusion, characterize the lithic assemblages. The pottery is tempered with a mixture of crushed rock material containing quartz and feldspar and sometimes abundant mica, typical of the wares of Family K. Practically all the pottery is decorated on the exterior with impressed designs of various kinds, displaying some connections with the Dotted Wavy Line group (Nordström 1972: 80, pls. 121-123).

Shiner considered the Khartoum Variant and Abkan as contemporary, while Randi Haaland and I came to the conclusion that the main part of the Abkan was somewhat later. Subsequent findings have adjusted the date (see below). The Khartoum Variant, as it is still called, is at present known from the Second cataract area, the Nabta-Kiseiba region in the western desert, Saï Island and from Kerma (Geus 2002: 101-102; Gatto in press). The latter sites have remains of a more permanent habitation (huts, storage pits). We may include the Khartoum Variant in the same “technocomplex” as the Dotted Wavy Line group. Maria Gatto has recently suggested that the Khartoum Variant can be divided into two phases, one early (KV 1) with a hunter-gathering-fishing economy dated in the 8<sup>th</sup> millennium BP and one late (KV 2) with additions of a food producing economy dated in the earlier half of the 7<sup>th</sup> millennium BP (Gatto in press, with references).

### **The Abkan**

Joel Shiner divided the Abkan into two phases, the Early Abkan and Developed Abkan, now dated in the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium calBC. These assemblages show a characteristic array of lithic traits, consisting of borers, groovers and denticulates. There is a high proportion of quartz in the debitage. The pottery is generally plain and undecorated – usually more than 80% is undecorated – made of a characteristic sandy fabric, often with dull grey smooth or burnished surfaces (Ware Family M). The sparse decoration consists of impressed zigzag designs and some other patterns on the exterior or at the rim only.

Subsequently I added a third phase, the Terminal Abkan, dated in the early part of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium calBC. The lithic picture is similar to the Developed Abkan, but with more microlithic inclusions, probably parts of composite tools. The pottery from this phase is more differentiated than before, always of the sandy fabric characteristic of the Abkan tradition, but displaying a full range of wares, from sherds with coarse or scraped exterior to vessels of black mouthed red polished, plain or rippled wares, often with milled rims. Other decoration is very sparse. On a few sites there are inclusions of Naqada pottery, with its characteristic surfaces and fabric, for example on Site 429 in the Second cataract area.

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3. Maria Gatto, pers. com.

Numerous Abkan sites appear in the Second cataract area and in Batn el Hagar to the south, with inclusions of both Developed and Terminal Abkan pottery in Batn-el-Hagar and on Saï Island (Carlson 1966; Couartou 1999; Geus 2002: 102). The distribution around this core area has been scrutinized by Maria Gatto who has also shown that there are clear ceramological affinities between the Abkan and the Karat group in Upper Nubia (Gatto 2002). The distribution to the east of the Nile is not yet clear but this can be settled through an analysis of the findings of the Italian mission sponsored by the Castiglioni brothers (*cf.* Sadr 1997). An Abkan connection is definitely established in the regions to the west of the Nile, especially in the Laqiya complex analysed by Mathias Lange (Lange & Nordström in press).

Gathering and fishing may have been the basic subsistence activities of the Abkan while hunting declined. Fish bones were certainly common on sites located close to the river (for example Site 6-G-25 and 6-S-25, Nordström 1972: 15). There is only weak evidence for animal husbandry (goat). One enigmatic trait of the Abkan is the absence of cemeteries in Lower Nubia and Batn el Hagar – there is no single grave published so far from these reaches that may be attributed with certainty to this entity. However, outside this area there are burials in contexts that can be considered to be closely related to the Abkan, such as Kadruka in the Dongola reach (Reinold 2001; Gatto pers. comm.)

Looking back from the viewpoint of the Second cataract area, one has the impression that the model of Nilotic adjustment proposed in the 1960s still holds. The sequence Shamarkian - Khartoum Variant - Abkan contains a blend of local developments and intrusions from the south and the vast regions of Eastern Sahara. However, the nature of the Abkan culture needs to be analysed further. Mathias Lange and myself have recently suggested that the term “Abkan culture group” should be used for different regional entities related in different ways to the Abkan, combining clear affinities as regards pottery, lithic traits, settlement pattern, and economic structure (Lange & Nordström in press).

The relationship between the Terminal Abkan in the south and what we call the Early A-Group in the northern part of Lower Nubia during the early half of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC must be thoroughly re-considered (Nordström 2004). There was obviously a fruitful exchange of material and ideas in all directions around the Nile basin during this formative stage, the ultimate phase of the Nilotic adjustment. In this perspective, there are now strong reasons to believe that the Terminal Abkan was the starting point for a trajectory which led to the emergence of the A-Group proper in the southern part of Lower Nubia (see Gatto in this issue).

When the international salvage campaign finished the fieldwork during the closing years of the 1960s, the focus moved again to the south and to the desert areas in the western fringes of the Nile basin. During the 1970s and 1980s Lech Krzyzaniak, Francis Geus, Isabella Caneva, Randi Haaland, Rodolfo Fattovich, Anthony Marks, Jacques Reinold, and others made remarkable discoveries of both settlements and cemeteries in the central parts of the Sudan and in Dongola reach in Upper Nubia. The B.O.S. and the ACACIA projects<sup>4</sup> directed by Rudolf Kuper carried

4. B.O.S. = Besiedlungsgeschichte der Ost-Sahara. ACACIA = Arid Climate Adaptation and Cultural Innovation in Africa.

through outstanding multi-disciplinary work from Wadi Howar in the south and the Laqiya region and Gilf Gebir in the north (Keding 1997; Jesse 2003; Lange 2003). Meanwhile, the team lead by Wendorf and Schild (1976) continued their investigations in the western desert in Nubia and Egypt. These and many other scholars laid the foundation for our present understanding of the emergence of food production in north-east Africa as a whole.

Many of these achievements will be described in subsequent contributions to this issue of *Archéo-Nil*.

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