

### Acknowledgement

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# The Nubian A-Group: a reassessment

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*This paper shall provide an up-dated assessment of the current knowledge on the Nubian A-Group culture. A general overview of the state of the art is given, with a special focus on the new data acquired recently from regions surrounding Lower Nubia. Its interpretation and the consequent revised definition of what is the A-Group is here reported.*

### Introduction

Although the Nubian A-Group culture has been in the last century the subject of many important studies, and it is definitely one of the best known cultures in the prehistory of northeastern Africa, an updated revision of our knowledge, to include also the last findings from regions surrounding Lower Nubia, is missing. I shall use this opportunity to present a preliminary assessment of the state of the art, mainly focused on the new information acquired recently and its significance. I had the occasion to discuss with Francis Geus about the late prehistory of Nubia many times when I was working with him in 2003 on the Sudanese Prehistoric pottery from El Multaga. He was quite skeptical on my idea on the existence of more variants of the A-Group. For him the real A-Group was that described by Nordström in the 1970's. In a way he was right.

### History of research

The A-Group culture was discovered at the beginning of the Twentieth century during the first archaeological salvage campaign, undertaken in the Egyptian Nubia for the construction of the Aswan Dam. A reassessment of its definition was the consequence of another salvage campaign, this time organized, in the 1960's and in the Sudanese Nubia, by the UNESCO for the construction of *Sadd el Ali*, south of Aswan.

George A. Reisner, the archaeologist who worked in the Aswan area during the 1907/1908 season, was the first who identified evidence of non-Egyptian cultures south of the First Cataract (Reisner 1910). He divided them in "groups" labeled following the alphabetic letters: from the A-Group to the X-Group.

This definition concerned only historic cultures while the prehistoric evidence was interpreted as Egyptian and followed the classification proposed in those years by Petrie for the Predynastic period (Petrie 1974). However, according to Reisner, there was a chronological shift between the Egyptian Predynastic and that from Nubia. As a matter of fact, at that time Egypt was seen as the nuclear area for cultural dynamics along the Nile, so the Nubian evidence had to be younger in date compared to the Egyptian one. In Reisner's chronological sequence the term A-Group defined the last phase of the Nubian prehistory, supposed to be contemporary to the end of Naqada III (*sensu* Kaiser 1956; 1957) and the first two Egyptian dynasties (ca. 3100-2800 BC).

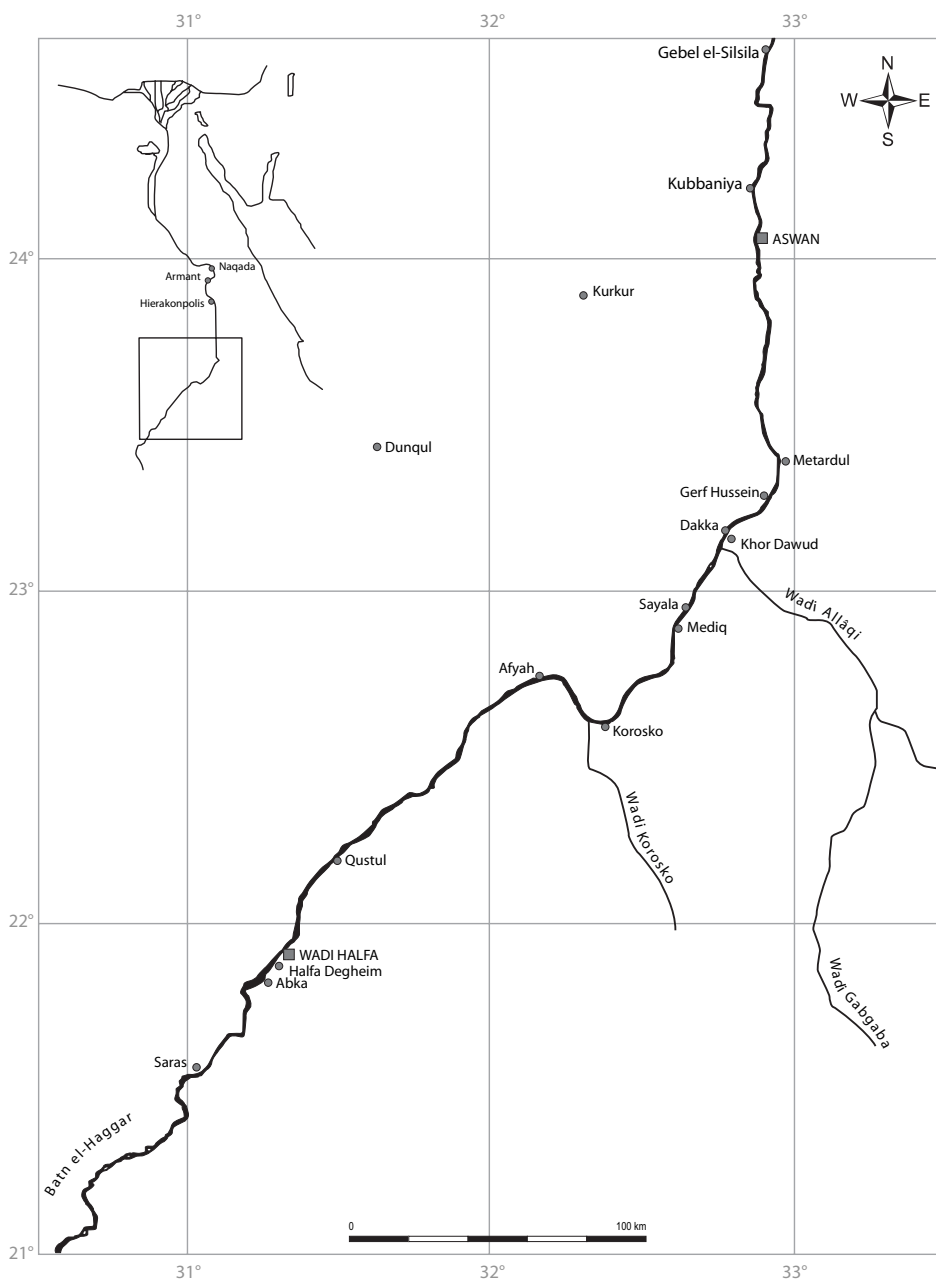
In spite of this cultural diversification, the material culture was described by Reisner as a whole. It is only thanks to Firth, who succeeded to Reisner in the work, and to Steindorff that the characteristic traits of the Nubian productions were initially brought to light and classified (Firth 1912; 1915; 1927; Steindorff 1935). A great improvement on the definition and knowledge of the A-Group was provided by the results of the UNESCO campaign in the Wadi Halfa reach and the Second Cataract area. Particularly, the work done by the Scandinavian Joint Expedition (Nordström 1972) and by the Oriental Institute of Chicago (Williams 1986) were of great importance. In those years there were also attempts to change Reisner's terminology, but terms such as "Early Nubian" and "A-Horizon", proposed respectively by Trigger (1965) and Adams (1977), did not obtain a great success. Worth to mention is the brilliant work done by Henry S. Smith (1966) on the B-Group funerary evidence. According to him, the B-Group as a cultural entity did not exist and the graves associated to it have to be mostly dated to the Early A-Group phase instead.

Since the 1990's the A-Group culture has been the subject of a new series of studies, mostly based on old, and generally published, materials (Smith 1991; Gatto & Tiraterra 1996; Gatto 1997a; 1997b; 1998a; 1998b; 2000; Nordström 1996; 2002; 2004; in press, forthcoming; Rampersad 1999; Takamiya 2005). However, in the last years fresh data was also added from regions surrounding Lower Nubia, mainly the Libyan Desert (Gatto 2001-2002; Lange 2003) and Upper Egypt (Gatto 2003, in press a; in press b).

### **Spatial distribution (fig. 1)**

So far, evidence of the A-Group is mostly concentrated in the section of the Nile Valley that goes from Kubbania to Melik en Nasir (AA.VV. 1967; Bietak & Engelmayer 1963; Donner 1967-1968; Emery & Kirwan 1935; Firth 1911; 1912; 1915; 1927; Gatto in press b; Gezelius & Schönback n.d.; Griffith 1921; Junker 1919; Leclant 1961; Lal 1967; Mills 1967-1968; Mills & Nordström 1966; Nordström 1972; Piotrovsky 1964; 1967; Raue per. comm.; Reisner 1910; Simpson 1961; Smith 1962; Steindorff 1935; Verwers 1961; 1962; Williams 1986; 1989). It was found on 193 sites: 87 located on the West Bank, 99 on the East Bank and 7 on islands of the First and Second Cataracts. Of these, 126 are graveyards and 67 are habitation sites, the latter including also few rock shelters.

It must be pointed out that A-Group evidence was not always found in an A-Group context. I recently proved that in the First Cataract area A-Group material culture was present within Naqadian sites (Gatto & Tiraterra 1996; Gatto 1997b; 2000; 2003; in press b). The percentages of Egyptian and Nubian materials in the region differed completely and the Nubian component was always less than 20% (Gatto 2000). Following this, sites found in the area between Kubbania and Metardul, previously associated to the A-Group, are now interpreted as part of the Naqadian settlement system.



**Fig. 1**  
Map of the Nile Valley with some of the localities cited in the text

On the other hand, a long-term and stable presence of Nubian people in the area surrounding the First Cataract and from there northward up to Hierakonpolis and even Armant is well attested (Gatto 2003; in press a; in press b; Midant-Reynes & Buchez 2002) and has to be taken into consideration. Interesting to note, unique cultural features, unknown elsewhere, are there recorded and may indicate the presence of a regional variant of the Naqadian culture combining, particularly during the first half of the fourth millennium BC, both Egyptian and Nubian traditions (Gatto 2003; in press b).

The sites located between Kubbania and Metardul are 23 in total: 14 on the west bank consists on 11 cemeteries and 3 settlements; 9 cemeteries were found on the east bank; and some graves and remains within the habitation site were recorded at Elephantine island.

Apart from the aforementioned sites, the other A-Group sites were clustered into three main areas. From Gerf Hussein to Mediq, in the Dakka plain, 39 sites were located: 22 on the west bank (20 cemeteries and 2 habitation sites) and 17 on the east bank (15 cemeteries and 2 settlements). In the Korosko band, up to Tamit, 20 sites were found: 17 on the west bank (13 graveyards and 4 settlements) and 3 on the east bank, all cemeteries. The southernmost area was comprised between Abu Simbel and Melik en Nasir. There, 109 sites were recorded: 34 on the west bank (18 cemeteries and 16 settlements), 70 on the east bank (35 cemeteries and 35 habitation sites), and 5 on islands (1 graveyard and 4 settlements).

More recently A-Group remains were recorded also in regions surrounding Lower Nubia. In Upper Egypt A-Group pottery was often documented in Predynastic sites, including Naqada, el Adaima, el Mamariya and Hierakonpolis (Baumgartel 1970; Needler 1984; Midant-Reynes & Buchez 2002; Gatto 2003).

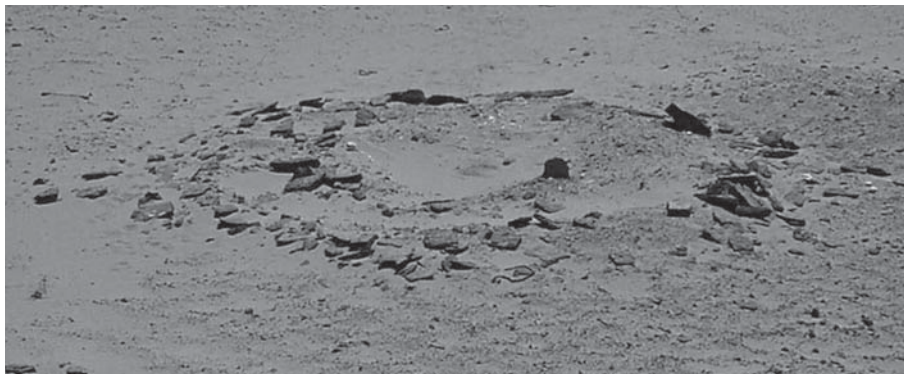
In the Libyan Desert A-Group related evidence is quite common, being found in the plateau behind Armant, in the Nabta-Kiseiba region, in Bir Sahara, in the oases of Kurkur and Dunqul, in the Laqiya region and possibly in Kharga (Nelson 2002; Gatto 2001-2002; Lange 2003; Darnell & Darnell per. comm.; Wuttman & Marchand per. comm.). In this case, however, the record is chronologically and culturally more articulated. Apart from the few potsherds recorded in Final Neolithic contexts at Nabta-Kiseiba, difficult to associate with certitude, the oldest evidence seems to come from Kurkur and it may be linked to the mixed Naqadian/Early A-Group culture already attested in the First Cataract area. The remaining records are dated to the Middle and Late A-Group phases, as described by Nordström in 2004. It must be pointed out that, following the nature of the findings, the A-Group presence in the Egyptian Western Desert was probably related to trading, while that in the Laqiya region to herding. The different use of the desert here attested is interesting, particularly because it shows how trade activities were primarily linking the Second Cataract region with the oases and Upper Egypt.

South of the Batn el Haggat clear evidence of the A-Group are not recorded yet. However, it must be pointed out that some vessels found in the Northern Dongola Reach (or Seleim basin) may be related to the A-Group tradition (Sjöström 1994; Welsby 1997; 2001; Salvatori & Usai per. comm.). This supposition should not surprise very much, as a matter of fact the Pre-Kerma culture is in many respects related to the A-Group one (Honegger 2004a). Apart from the similarities attested on the ceramic productions, as an example of this relationship can be mentioned a female burial of 3000 BC found in the Kerma region. The grave goods included a copper awl and a quartzite palette, typical female funerary offerings in the A-Group culture (Honegger 2004b). However, up until now only the Middle and Late Pre-Kerma phases have been archaeologically documented, the former dated from around 3000 BC (Honegger 2004b), while information on the earliest phase, the one probably contemporary with the A-Group, are still missing.

As far as the Eastern Desert and the Atbai region are concerned, the lack of a systematic archaeological research strongly affected the current knowledge. The few information available was collected by the Castiglioni Expedition in the Atbai (Sadr *et al.* 1994; 1995; Sadr 1997; Castiglioni *et al.* 1995). A large tumulus was found at Wadi el Ku, the easternmost part of the Wadi el Allaqi in the northern Sudan. Charcoal from the offering place gave a radiometric date of 3330-3220 cal. BC ( $4480 \pm 20$  bp). Unfortunately, it was heavily looted and no diagnostic evidence, such as pottery, was recorded (Sadr *et al.* 1994). Red Polished Rippled

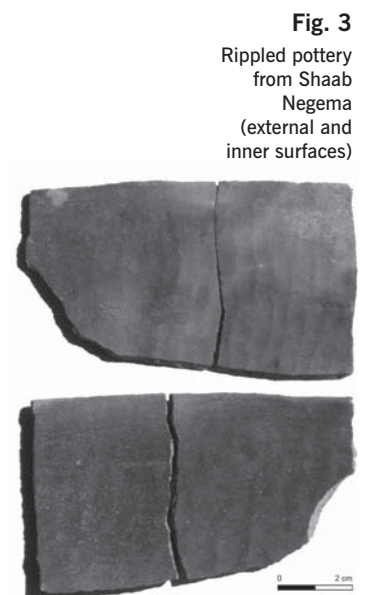
wares were noticed on surface of a village in the Wadi Elei, the southernmost section of the Wadi el Allaqi, but no radiometric dates are available. Two tumuli from the same area were dated to 4550-4360 cal. BC ( $5650 \pm 70$  bp) and 4050-3790 cal. BC ( $5140 \pm 100$  bp). The pottery in association is definitely similar to the contemporary Abkan production, and in some respects to the Badarian one as well. The attribution of the Red Polished Rippled wares to that phase, or to a younger one connected with the A-Group, remains a difficult task.

Special note has to be devoted to the isolated tumulus found last year at Wadi el Lawi, in the desert east of Kom Ombo (Gatto 2005). Although the Shaab Negema tumulus (**fig. 2**) was heavily disturbed by plunderers and no radiometric dates are available yet, during its cleaning potsherds belonging to three



**Fig. 2**  
The Shaab  
Negema tumulus

different vessels were found. Two are Brown Burnished bowls, while the other is a large Brown Burnished bowl with a wide Rippled decoration applied on both surfaces (**fig. 3**). A resemblance between the Shaab Negema pottery and Abkan and Badarian productions can be noticed. However, similarities are detectable also with the A-Group production. In this respect, a date of  $3475 \pm 100$  BC cal. has been associated by Butzer and Hansen (1968) to a concentration of fireplaces found in the upper Wadi Kharit. There, and in other sites in the Kom Ombo plain, black-exterior potsherds were collected. More important, in some cases Black Topped pottery was found in association with them. According to Butzer and Hansen, the finding of this pottery with such chronological attribution may be correlated to an A-Group presence in the plain. As a matter of fact, Black Topped vessels were not produced anymore in Egypt during the second half of the fourth millennium BC. Because of the lack of any Neolithic evidence in the area south of Armant, and following the aforementioned reference, I was tentatively suggesting an attribution to the Early A-Group for the Shaab Negema tumulus (Gatto 2005; in press a; in press b). However, I should take into consideration the possibility that in this case we are dealing with a Neolithic evidence instead. In any case, this is a unique discovery: it can be the northernmost A-Group related grave in the Eastern Desert or it can be the only Neolithic evidence in that sector of Upper Egypt. More precisely, its location along one of the main desert routes and the presence of a superficial stone structure, not common in funerary contexts along the Nile, let us suggest that we are dealing with desert people of Nubian affiliation, either Neolithic or A-Group related. Furthermore, its isolation, its prominent location in a small valley close to the main course of Wadi el Lawi, the complex stone structure and the presence of two human bodies, a male aged between 35 and 50 years of age and a young female aged between 20 and 35 years of age (Dickman per. comm.), may imply a special social importance.



**Fig. 3**  
Rippled pottery  
from Shaab  
Negema  
(external and  
inner surfaces)

### Chronology

Following Hendrickx's reassessment of the Naqadian chronological sequence (1996), the oldest A-Group evidence was contemporary to phase IC (ca. 3800-3700 BC), while the most recent to phase IIIB-C (ca. 3100-2900 BC). This attribution is primarily based on cross-reference with the Naqadian material found in A-Group contexts, as radiometric dates available are scanty (Nordström 1972: 215; Gatto 1995: 100). Four dates were obtained from the habitation site AFH-1 at Afyah, three from the habitation site SJE 340 at Debeira, and five from the cemetery SJE 277 at Halfa Dagheim; none of them is related to the Early A-Group phase (**tabl. 1**).

Although at this stage of knowledge there are no consistent records for a Nubian presence in the southern part of Upper Egypt and the northern part of Lower Nubia prior to 3800 BC, this does not mean the area was avoid of any settlement at that time. In fact, tulip beakers were found in two cemeteries in Dakka, reused in C-Group graves. Up until now, in Egypt they are always dated to the fifth millennium BC and never linked to the A-Group (Firth 1927; Gatto in press a). The parallels brought to light between the Early A-Group of the First Cataract and the previous Badarian culture bear witness to a possible direct relationship between the two (Gatto in press a).

The Early A-Group evidence from the Dakka plain and the First Cataract region is contemporary to the Terminal Abkan phase of the Second Cataract (Nordström 1972). The two units are sharing many characteristic traits, although it should be pointed out that direct comparisons are difficult because the Terminal Abkan is mainly known from settlements (very few), while the Early A-Group from funerary contexts. The main discriminating factor between them is the presence/absence of Naqada material culture within the respective sites. However, I have identified in the Abkan collection of the Scandinavian Joint Expedition in Uppsala more examples of Predynastic ceramics than previously recorded (Nordström 1972; Lange & Nordström in press). The perception that the Early A-Group and the Terminal Abkan are two different cultures has probably to be revised. More likely they are regional developments of the same culture group (*sensu* Clarke 1968).

On the other hand, there are definitely more affinities between the Terminal Abkan and the Middle and Terminal A-Group than between the latter phases

**Tabl. 1**  
Radiometric dates from A-Group contexts

Context	Dates Uncalibrated BP	Dates Calibration BC
AFH-1	4500±120BP	3550BC (95.4%) 2850BC
AFH-1	4380±115BP	3400BC (95.4%) 2650BC
AFH-1	4290±120BP	3350BC (95.4%) 2550BC
AFH-1	4660±100BP	3650BC (95.4%) 3050BC
SJE340-SEII:5	4440±90BP	3360BC (95.4%) 2900BC
SJE340-SEII:4	4240±70BP	3020BC (95.4%) 2580BC
SJE340-SEII:4	4060±80BP	2900BC (95.4%) 2350BC
SJE277/65:4	4630±120BP	3650BC (95.4%) 3000BC
SJE277/65:4	4700±110BP	3700BC (95.4%) 3050BC
SJE277/65:4	3880±440BP	3700BC (95.4%) 1200BC
SJE277/49:12	4360±150BP	3400BC (94.2%) 2550BC
SJE277/49:12	4620±90BP	3650BC (95.4%) 3050BC

and the Early A-Group to the north. The real Early A-Group phase should be identified in what we are defining now as Terminal Abkan. This is an hypothesis recently suggested by Nordström (per. comm. and this issue), but not published yet, and I totally agree with him.

The A-Group was divided in consecutive development phases by many authors, including Trigger (1965) and Williams (1986). Nevertheless, the definition currently in use is that of Nordström (1972: 28-32; with the recent revision of 2004). Three phases were recognized by him: Early, Middle and Terminal. His proposal was mainly based on the evidence from the Wadi Halfa reach and the Second Cataract region dated to the latter phases. As far as the earliest phase is concerned, it was defined only using information from previous publications. My recent revision of the Early A-Group has identified two successive stages of development within the earliest phase (Gatto 1998b; in press a). Combining both classifications the following sequence can be proposed:

Early A-Group, stage I ca.	3800-3600 BC	(Naqada IC-IIA)
Early A-Group, stage II ca.	3600-3400 BC	(Naqada IIB-D)
Middle A-Group	ca. 3400-3200 BC	(Naqada IID-III A)
Terminal A-Group	ca. 3200-2900 BC	(Naqada IIIB-C).

However, taken into consideration what mentioned before about the Early A-Group phase and its relationship with the Middle and Terminal, this sequence should probably be revised soon.

There is a clear discrepancy between the medium value of the calibrated ages previously reported and the cross-reference with the Naqada culture. Leaving aside the date with the highest range (SJE277/65:4) in the radiometric chronology, the Middle and Terminal A-Group phases have to be dated from ca. 3420 to 2780 BC. However, following the cross-reference with the Egyptian counterpart, the younger limit has to be fixed to around 2900 BC. This inconsistency may be the result of a too wide calibration range or a gap in the archaeological record.

### Archaeological evidence

Cemeteries and settlements along the Nile were located on the lower gebel terraces, at the edge of the alluvial plain and at the mouth of the wadis (Nordström 1972: 22-23). They were clustered in strategic areas, well connected with nearby deserts but also with surrounding cultures along the Nile.

### Settlements

Habitation sites were mostly studied in southern Lower Nubia while to the north no specific work was devoted to them yet. The majority of the settlements consists of simple camp-sites with no permanent structures. Only remains of fireplaces were noticed, sometimes in association to storage pits and very little remains of possible perishable huts. The anthropic deposit was often heavily disturbed and no clear stratigraphy was recorded. Most of the remains, which include lithics, potsherds, grindstones, animal bones, ostrich egg-shell fragments, palettes and ornamental objects, were mostly scattered on the surface. Some settlements with remnants of stone house foundations were found as well (Nordström 1972: 20-21).

A unique discovery is that of Afyah, an habitation site located in the Korosko bend, partially investigated by Smith (1962) and Lal (1967). It consists of a

number of complex stone houses, the biggest with at least 6 rooms, with storage pits, plastered on the inside, associated to them. Doors were opened at the rounded wall corners and floors were made with mud and pebbles. The material found on surface and in the deposit consists of flint industry, polished stone tools, grindstones, bone awls, a copper awl, and pottery, both Egyptian and Nubian. Animal bones and carbonized remains of wheat, barley and leguminous were found as well (Lal 1967: 106). As far as the Egyptian pottery is concerned, judging from the published data, as well as from the drawings gently gave to my disposal by Smith, it seems in higher proportion compared to the local one.

Its location in the area of Lower Nubia with less A-Group sites, the structure of its houses, the great number of Egyptian objects, and the conspicuous remains of domestic grains deserve a further and more accurate interpretation. No other evidence like Afyah was recorded along the Nile valley south of the First Cataract, not even the Pre-Kerma settlement can be compared to it (Honegger 2004a). Parallels can be found with some Predynastic settlements in Egypt and with Naqadian colonies in the Levant (Gophna & Gazit 1985: 9-15; Kempinski & Gilead 1991: 175-176). A reading of the site as a Naqadian outpost in Nubia will make sense as far as the location, the architecture and the material culture are concerned. As a matter of fact, the site is positioned at the end of the Sinn el Qaddab desert route connecting the Aswan area with the Korosko bend, via Kurkur and Dunqul oases. In addition, it is not far from the mouth of Wadi Korosko, the major route crossing the Atbai to reach Abu Hamed in the Fourth Cataract area. The location will be perfect to be directly in contact with what we can call the Qustul chiefdom, the core area for the Middle and Terminal A-Group. In this way, the Egyptians could bypass the Dakka plain and the First Cataract region, where A-Group evidence was definitely less in number and in importance compared to that from the Second Cataract. Of course this hypothesis deserves further thoughts. Another peculiar site is the complex of 578 storage pits at Khor Dawd (Piotrovski 1964; 1967), interpreted (Nordström 1972: 26) as a trade or market place. Few rock shelters were also in use as habitation areas (Bietak & Engelmayer 1963; Myers 1958; 1960; Nordström 1972: 21, 233). There the presence of rock art was noticed as well.

The settlement sites found in the Laqiya region were the common camp-sites with remains of fireplaces and cultural material scattered mostly on surface (Lange 2003). This was not the case of the Bir Sahara sites. They consisted of two pottery caches placed in the vicinity of the Bir Sahara well. I have interpreted them as trade posts along one of the desert routes connecting the Second Cataract region to Upper Egypt, via Dakhlah and Kharga (Gatto 2001-2002).

### **Funerary and sacrificial remains**

The mortuary data displayed a great variability, depending either on regional, chronological and socio-cultural differences. The shaft shape was commonly oval or circular, with one or two lateral niches, or rectangular with rounded edges, occasionally with later niches. A peculiar bee-hive shape, with one chamber or two chambers one on top of the other, was usually recorded in northern Lower Nubia (Reisner 1910; Firth 1912; 1915; 1927). The shaft interior was either plastered with mud or lined by mat works. As a general rule, graves did not present superstructures and the shaft was sealed by large stone slabs. However, few examples of stone structures were recorded, again from the Korosko bend northwards (Firth 1927; Smith 1962: fig. 14). Inside one

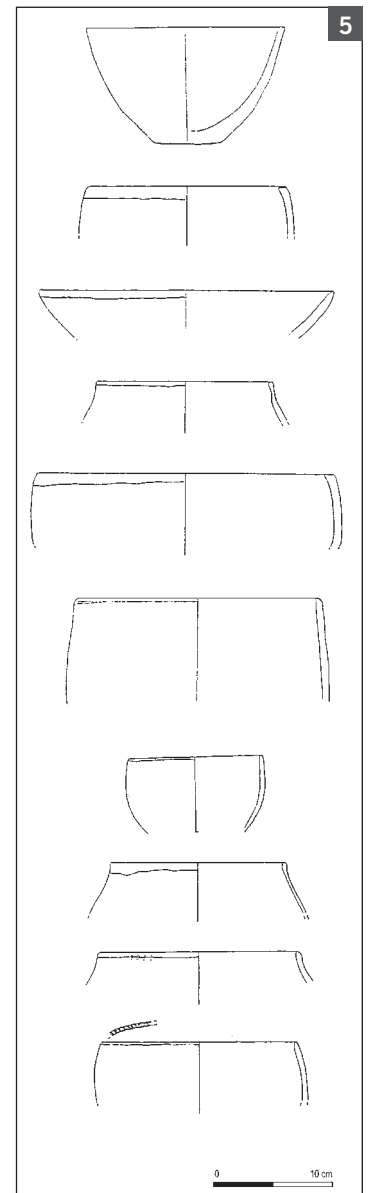




**Fig. 6**  
Examples  
of pottery  
from  
Nag el  
Qarmila

grave could be found up to six bodies; they were generally laying in a contracted position on their left side, with the head oriented towards the south and the face looking west. The bodies from the Second Cataract cemeteries were commonly wrapped in animal skins, while those from the First Cataract in mats or linen. Again, bodies in northern Lower Nubia could lay down a mat or a wooden box, those in the Second Cataract area on animal skins. Remains of wooden beds were recorded only at Qustul (Williams 1986). It is worth mentioning that discrepancies highlighted here are the consequence of the previously discussed different cultural attribution between the northern and southern Lower Nubia records.

Objects placed in the grave as offering to the death were many and of great variety. Among others, they included: local and Egyptian imported pottery, stone vessels, grindstones, palettes, Nile pebbles, mace heads, copper and bone tools, ornamental objects made on different materials, ornaments for clothing, hand axes, incised ostrich egg-shells, incense burners, lithic tools, clay figurines, lapislazuli, seals and seal impressions. Shells, seeds and fruits were part of the grave goods as well. As for the Nubian pottery, that associated to the Early A-Group, although so far poorly studied, differs in some attributes to the Middle and Terminal A-Group one. More information could be recently gathered from a cemetery and nearby settlement found at Nag el Qarmila (fig. 4, 5 & 6), a locality right to the north of Wadi Kubbaniya (Gatto in press b; Gatto & Giuliani forthcoming).



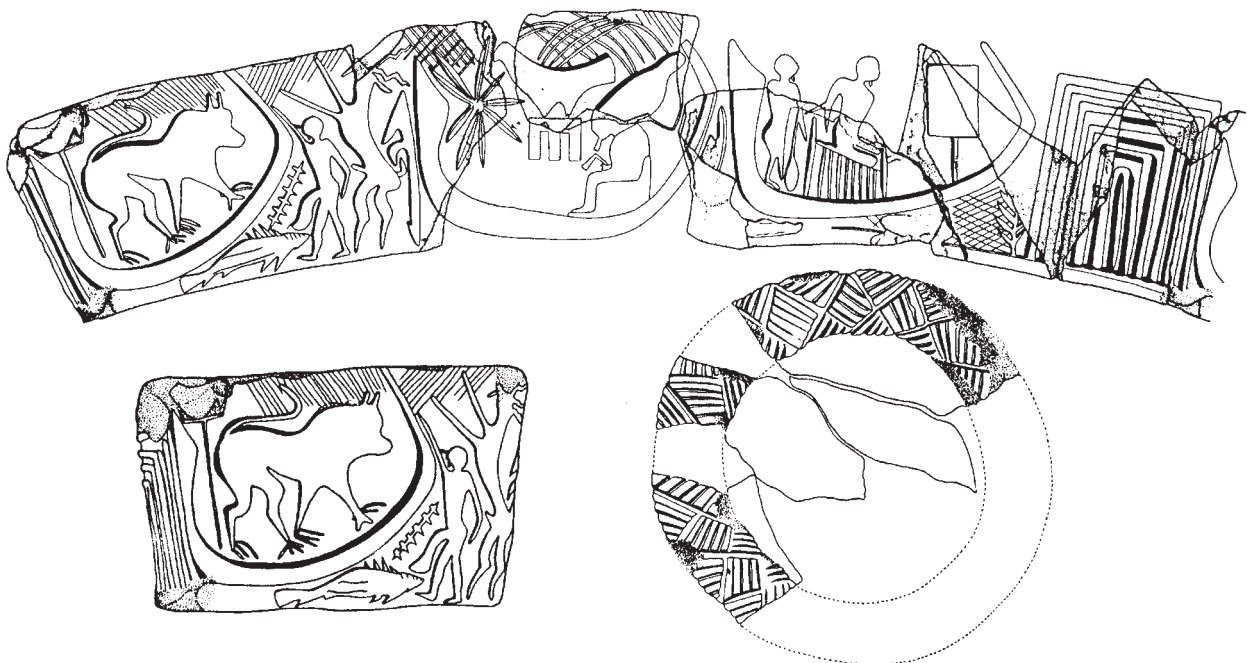
**Fig. 5**  
Early Nubian  
pottery from  
Nag el Qarmila

**Fig. 4**  
The Nag el  
Qarmila sites

A special note deserve the animal sacrifice. Animals were either buried in human graves or independently within the human cemeteries. They consisted in dogs, sheep/goats, gazelles and cattle. The two categories of animal burials were largely concentrated in the First Cataract region and mainly dated to the Early A-Group phase (Flores 2003; Gatto 2003). Exceptions were the cemeteries of Naga Wadi, in the Dakka plain, and Qustul. However, both of them were elite cemeteries dated to the Middle and Terminal A-Group. This latter case does not seem to be directly connected to the First Cataract tradition, as well as to the previous Badarian and Sudanese Neolithic customs (Flores 2003). It seems more likely that the A-Group elite copied the Hierakonpolis practice to place animal burials within the elite cemetery, well attested since Naqada IIA-B at cemetery HK6 (Friedman 2003).

Two elite cemeteries were located in the Dakka plain: cemetery 137 at Sayala and cemetery 142 at Naga Wadi (Firth 1927). But it is definitely cemetery L at Qustul the most important elite A-Group graveyard, showing unique features in every respect (Williams 1986). This small cemetery of 33 graves, including 7 cattle burials, dated to the Middle and Terminal phases, is the burial ground of kings, their families and the court. All the human shafts were rectangular in shape, very long and with a lateral niche. This type seems mainly associated to elite burials, being also found in Naga Wadi and Hierakonpolis (Firth 1927; Adams 1996). Many were the multiple depositions of either male and female adults together with infants. Remains of funerary beds were noticed in some of them. In the graves were recorded up to 200 pottery vessels, the majority of which of a fine manufacture. The local productions reached up to 75%, the rest were imports from Egypt and even Palestine. Also objects such as palettes, beads and pebbles were on great numbers. As an example, in tomb L17 were found 60 beads on gold, 202 on shell, 15 on ivory and 1062 on stone. Here some of the items rarely found in other contexts were a common occurrence. This is the case of incense burners, stone vessels, lip plugs, clay tokens, pieces of sculptures, bread models, seals and mace heads.

**Fig. 7**  
The Qustul  
incenses



Mace heads found at Qustul, as well as those from the elite cemetery 137 at Sayala, clearly represent symbols of power, as it was also common in Predynastic Egypt. On the other hand, the finds of mace heads at cemetery 17 at Khor Bahan, dated to the Early A-Group, could not be associated to any social power. This change in function and social meaning clearly happened sometime during the Middle and Terminal phases and probably, again, was a consequence of the strong relationship with the Naqada culture.

Engraved scenes were found on some incense burners. Those on the so-called *Qustul* and *Archaic Horus* incense burners were showing sacred parades of boats going towards a palace façade (fig. 7). In both scenes a royal figure, dressed like a pharaoh and sitting on a throne, was wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt. Divinized animal figures were represented as well. According to Williams (1986) they were a falcon and a lion, but as far as the latter case is concerned, in my opinion the animal corresponded to a baboon (Gatto 1997a: 44).

### **Economic and social aspects**

Evidence of wheat, barley and leguminous plants was found all over Lower Nubia in sites dated either to the Early, Middle and Terminal phases (Reisner 1910; Lal 1967; Nordström 1972). However, it must be pointed out that it was more consistent to the north and at Afyah, due to the aforementioned link with the Naqadian culture. Linen and chaff, indirect proofs of agriculture activity, again were mainly recorded in the First Cataract cemeteries.

On the other end, remains of sheep/goats and dogs were found in the First Cataract area and the Dakka plain, while cattle skins and leather works were common features in the Second Cataract region (Nordström 1972). Cattle bones were also recorded in the Laqiya camp-sites (Lange 2003).

According to what aforesaid, to define the subsistence strategy of the A-Group culture some variables has to be taken into consideration: 1) the Early A-Group probably did not represent the first development of the culture; 2) the Middle and Terminal A-Group from the north had a strong Naqadian influence; 3) only the evidence from the Wadi Halfa reach and Laqiya, and in part those from the northern areas, had to be considered as the real A-Group.

As a result, the A-Group economic subsistence was mainly based on herding. The finding of the Laqiya sites (Lange 2003) demonstrates how the pastoral segment of the A-Group society was also seasonally occupying desert areas for the pasture. Agriculture seemed to play a secondary role and attested only along the Nile. Hunting and fishing were practised as well, but they were definitely of less importance. On the contrary, a special position has to be recognized to trade activities. Its location had probably favoured a commercial specialization of the Nubian group living in the Second Cataract region during the Predynastic period. The rising Naqadian elites were requesting for gold, ivory, exotic animals, cattle and incense to enlarge and consolidate their power. Such items were probably exchanged by the Nubians with oil of olive, beer, cheese and grains (Trigger 1976: 39; Nordström 1972: 25-26; Gatto 1998b: 517). As already mentioned, the two pottery caches at Bir Sahara were probably A-Group trade posts along one of the many desert routes connecting Lower Nubia to Egypt (Gatto 2001-2002).

As far as the administration is concerned, many seals and seal impressions were found within the A-Group graves. Some of them were of Naqadian tradition, some others of local tradition. Few seal impressions were still in place, sealing the content of Egyptian jars. However, this evidence does not testify

the presence of a real administrative organization in Nubia. The Egyptian-like evidence can be only an import without any intrinsic significance from the Nubian point of view, apart from its extrinsic value. That of local tradition can be the result of a Naqadian sort of influence. In regards to the seal impressions on jars they were definitely connected with the Egyptian administration, but this does not imply a Nubian counterpart.

Opinions on the A-Group social complexity had changed significantly in the last decades, particularly after the publication of cemetery L at Qustul. In 1972 Nordström was writing: *a certain degree of social differentiation existed, at least during the last phase of the A-Group... examples of this differentiation are coming from cemetery 137 and Afyah* (Nordström 1972: 26). Nowadays, according to what found in Qustul, as well as to the new analyses made by Nordström on the funerary evidence (1996; 2002; 2004), it may be assumed that the A-Group, particularly in its later stage of development, had reached a high degree of social diversification. A regional chiefdom, or even a proto-state to compare to the Naqadian one, with Qustul at the centre, may be detected in the Second Cataract region. In the Dakka plain, on the contrary, it seems only local chiefdoms emerged, namely at Sayala and Naga Wadi. Of course, the evidence from the First Cataract are here interpreted as part of the Naqadian system.

If on one side the emergence of a complex society of the proto-state level in the Second Cataract region has to be mainly linked to the presence of an Egyptian counterpart, on the other side elements of social stratification were already encountered within the Nubian Neolithic funerary record and have to be interpreted as a background for a local development of social complexity. In favour of an autochthonous and long-term trajectory there is also the successive rise of the Kerma state society in Nubia.

According to the analysis of the funerary evidence major social differences may be noticed within an area and not a single site. There are, for example, elite cemeteries and graveyards for the common people, or necropolises where males and females are buried together (e.s. Gerf Hussein and Qustul) and others where males are buried with other males or children and females with other females and children (e.s. Halfa Degheim) (Firth 1912; Nordström 1972). The importance of children in the society was manifested by widespread single burials with special grave goods: gold and lapislazuli to the north, ostrich egg-shell bottles and pottery strainers to the south (Firth 1927; Nordström 1972). Another information highlighted regards female burials, often showing a great social significance, not higher but different compared to the males (Nordström 1996). This seems to reflect a social organization where women played a central role, giving birth, growing children and taking care of the familiar management. Following this, according to Nordström the A-Group was a matrilineal society mainly based on agriculture as producing activity (Nordström 1996). The same was suggested for the Naqadian culture in Egypt (Hassan 1992). Apart from a practical point of view, the role played by the women in the society was strongly influencing the ideological and religious spheres as well. Rituals and religious beliefs, connected with concepts such as birth, fertility, creation, death, and resurrection, all associated to women and agriculture, became an important background in the rising of the royal iconography in Egypt, and judging from Qustul, also in Lower Nubia. More likely, this ideology and the binomial women-agriculture were primarily associated to the segment of the A-Group living along the Nile, the one more involved in agriculture and trade, with probably less link to the pastoral life.

A more specific study of the funerary offerings in female and male graves, taking into account their geographical and chronological distribution, shall reinforce a differentiated role according to gender and economic strategy. A revision of the funerary rituals related to children may highlight how the acquisition of social status was performed within the group and which symbols were selected for it.

### Concluding remarks

On the basis of the present updated knowledge of what is the A-Group, I would like here to discuss some concluding points:

1• The Early A-Group has to be seen as the northernmost variant of the Nubian tradition. Of course, it has some similarities with both the Terminal Abkan and the Middle and Terminal A-Group. However, differences between the Early A-Group and the southern counterparts are so numerous and consistent that it can be put it aside from the main cultural development trajectory, which in the Wadi Halfa reach and the Second Cataract area led to the emergence of the A-Group proper.

2• Francis Geus was right thinking that the real A-Group was the one defined by Nordström (1972) in the Wadi Halfa reach and the Second Cataract region. But also Reisner (1910) had the correct view describing as A-Group only the evidence dated to the latest part of the Nubian prehistory, while he rightly associated the rest with the Egyptian Predynastic. The main misunderstanding was probably created when the oldest evidence from the First Cataract was included in the A-Group sequence.

3• The relationship between the Early A-Group and the contemporary Terminal Abkan deserves more attention. A further thought has to be devoted also to the connection between the Early A-Group and the Badarian and the Abkan on one side, and the Middle and Terminal A-Group on the other. The current investigation on the Aswan-Kom Ombo region will definitely help on this sense, particularly as far as a better understanding of the northern cultural entities is concerned.

4• In the last years Nordström (n.d.) had proposed the concept of core and periphery for the spatial distribution of the A-Group. He identified the core area in the section of the Nile valley that goes from Gerf Hussein to Saras, but some evidence occurred also to the north of Gerf Hussein up to Kubanniya. As periphery Nordström defined the evidence from the desert areas. For me, the core part of the A-Group's culture territory can be identified with the Wadi Halfa reach and the Second Cataract region. On the contrary, the Dakka plain and the First Cataract area, as well as the surrounding deserts, have to be seen as its peripheral expansion.

5• The Middle and Terminal A-Group display the same cultural development, which cannot be detected in the Early A-Group. In this sense, culturally speaking the Middle and Terminal phases have to be interpreted as "the A-Group culture", while the cultural attribution of the early phase needs an urgent revision.

According to what has been presented here this new exiting phase of research on the late prehistory of Nubia, has definitely brought fresh ideas and new results which will change considerably our current perspective.

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