Introduction

The site of Wadi Khashab was observed in satellite photos and located on the ground for the first time by Prof. Steven E. Sidebotham and Dr. James A. Harrell during their survey of the Eastern Desert in 2009/2010 (Sidebotham and Zych 2010, 2012). A monumental stone enclosure was set up at the common starting point of two large drainage systems – Wadi Gemal running to the Red Sea and the second one meeting the Nile near Kom Ombo (Figure 1). The site was excavated by Piotr Osipinski’s team since 2012 and since 2014 with a research grant from the Polish National Center of Science 2012/07/N/HS3/04056.

The main component of the ceremonial complex in Wadi Khashab is the animal cemetery surrounded by megalithic stelae (Figure 2). The main enclosure is a large ovoid feature approximately 18m in diameter. The enclosure was formed of long pieces of slate rock set upon end or obliquely leaning to the inside, the longest of these measuring 2m.
Figure 2: The main part of a ceremonial complex in Wadi Khashab with features known so far.
Inside the enclosure there were numerous robbery pits and related dumps from which *primigenious* cattle bones were recovered. Excavation of the inner part of the enclosure produced evidence of stone superstructures of animal burials as well as the presence of features without superstructures. There were also stone stelae over 2m in length (the longest was 3.23m), all of them apparently deliberately toppled and even moved from their original positions by a few meters. Other diverse concentrations of destroyed stelae and paved stretches were observed within a radius of 200m.

One of the superstructure-less features recorded in the SW part of the enclosure was explored in the 2014 season (Figure 3). Just next to this feature’s round 80cm diameter cut, there was a flat stone set on the ground with numerous scattered fragments of a ceramic bowl. Exploring the pit, slabs forming a blockage were found at a depth of c. 40cm that were placed directly above a child burial (juvenile in age). The body was set in a squatting position. Personal adornments consisted of a necklace of *Conidae* snail shells and an ankle bracelet of turquoise faience beads.

The only pottery finds related to the ceremonial complex came from a cluster recorded at the primary ground level that were sealed with stone rubble and were near the child burial

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**Figure 3:** Feature 10 – a child burial most probably related to the late phase of Wadi Khashab (second half of the second millennium BC). *Photo by M. Osypinska.*
described above. All the fragments came from a single vessel – the bowl is 11cm tall and 14cm in diameter at the rim. The surface was brown and smoothed; the outer surface was decorated with a deeply-incised horizontal-line pattern made with a comb; the rim top and band were decorated with an incised herring-bone or chevron pattern and a similar pattern was also present at the base (Figure 4).

The closest examples to the Wadi Khashab pot were found both in Lower Nubia and Upper Egypt in C-Group contexts (domestic and funerary) dated to the end of the Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period (e.g., Gratien 2000; M.C. Gatto, personal communication). Similar vessels were noticed also in the Old Kush II (Middle Kerma) graves at the 4th Nile Cataract (Kołosowska et al. 2003). Related only to one of the many features found in Wadi Khashab, it cannot be said that this pot can be used to date the whole ritual complex to the first half of the second millennium BCE; we can definitely say that at least part of the complex was in use during that period.

The cattle burials were most probably the main elements of the whole ceremonial complex in Wadi Khashab. Excavated in 2012/2014 the well-preserved burial set in the central part of the enclosure produced a vast number of osteometric

Figure 4: Pottery bowl form from the second half of the second millennium BC marking the late phase of Wadi Khashab. Photo by P. Osypinski.
The body was laid in a pretty shallow (c. 30cm) oval pit (oriented NW-SE) and covered with a stone superstructure (Figure 5). The cattle was laid on its left side, with angled limbs and head to the NW. The *bucranium* was cut off before internment. Just next to the burial on the primary ground level, some additional small ruminant bones and charcoal were noticed.

The animal skeleton explored in Wadi Kahshab burial belonged to African *primigenious* cattle. It was 11 years old and 140cm tall at the withers – much larger than typical values of historic cattle of the Nile Valley (Chaix 2007, 2011; Chaix and Grant 1992) – corresponding with late Neolithic types (*e.g.*, Chaix 2011). The shape of the thoracic vertebrae spinous processes suggests the presence of a hump. General massiveness of the skeleton suggests that the animal sex is male.

Both morphological features of the buried animal and formal analogies of stone enclosures accompanied by stelae suggest dating of the earlier phase of Wadi Khashab to the 4th millennium BC. At that time, the Nile region was occupied by the last Naqada Culture and Nubian A-groups, and the Egyptian state was emerging. Nearly 200km to the south of Wadi Khashab – in Wadi Allaqi (Sudan)

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**Figure 5:** Feature 1 – the cattle burial of Wadi Khashab under a stone built superstructure. *Photo by M. Osypinska.*
there were also large stone arrangements in use (24m in diameter, with remains of ceremonial feasting inside – Sadr et al. 1995). Very probably the same chronology could be attributed to the magnificent cattle cemetery in Er Arib (Murray 1926). Finding the large stone structures in the Eastern Desert could be related to beliefs of nomadic communities generally associated with cattle (cf. Jesse et al. 2013). The pottery dated to nearly two millennia later points to a very long lasting tradition of the Wadi Khashab ceremonial complex.

The ceremonial complex in the Red Sea Mountains, with its central focus of buried cattle and child burial, is a remnant of pastoral cultures not tied to the Nile Valley alone. It confirms ancient roots of cyclical migrations of cattle keepers in the sub-Saharan belt. Crossing the Nubian part of the Nile, the communities contributed to the following cultural entities as Group A, Group C or Pre-Kerma and Kerma – all with clear African origins. We believe that Wadi Khashab could be the northernmost mark of their penetration known so far.

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