Late Meroitic Cemetery in Mansurkotti, Northern Sudan

Fawzi Hassan Bakheit
Dept. of Archaeology
University of Naileen, Khartoum (Sudan)

Under the mandate of the DDASP (Deba: Dam Archaeological Survey Project), a team of National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) researchers, with funding from the Qatar-Sudan Archaeological Project (QSAP), conducted an archaeological excavation at the site DS2, a site known since the 1960s by the Sudanese Antiquities Service, and located 305 km north-east of Khartoum (Figure 1). It is a cemetery composed by a large number of rounded gravel mounds, 88 of which could be identified and plotted. The cemetery occupies an area of 460x200m and it is located north of the Mansurkotti village, about 250m south of the left bank of the Nile (Figure 2). The mounds are distributed along a possibly old Nile terrace that has an East-West orientation. The mounds have been in increasing danger of destruction, and in many their height has been significantly reduced due to both natural and human factors. The gradual expansion of the Islamic cemetery immediately to the north of the old cemetery, urban expansion to the south, the fact that roads are now crossing the site, and that the cemetery is also a gravel quarrying source for the villagers are among some of destructive factors. Archaeologically the site deserves excavation and further study in order to obtain more information on burial traditions of the late Meroitic Post-Meroitic periods, as no other large cemeteries exist in the area.

A total of 25 graves have been excavated during two field seasons. The strategy of work was to start with the most threatened mounds, that is, those bordering the Islamic cemetery, and those endangered by common roads. Generally, the research method was to plot a square around the mound and excavate a trench crossing the mound. This method was used for all excavated mounds, except the first excavated tomb (T1), which was divided into four sections, to have an idea about the burial shaft position. In cases where the mound is small, the whole mound was excavated. Only three out of all the excavated tombs were found to be intact (T1, T19 and T24) and three were partially plundered (T80, T79 and T81), the remaining were totally plundered.

The natural formation detected in the excavated tomb profiles is composed of repeated layers of unconsolidated gravels, sands, and clays. Their nature is dry and friable, which makes it difficult in many cases to clean the burial pit edges safely without causing damage. This formation, which rests on the alluvium into which the burial pit is usually cut, is more than 2m thick. The amount of gravel decreases northward where the paleo Nile channel is found and the soil becomes siltier. The fill of the graves was composed of gravel and sand, the amount of gravel decreasing with depth. The preservation of these burials...
was generally good although some skeletons were incomplete as a result of looting in antiquity (Figure 3).

From the estimation of age, the number of middle age adult females was higher than the number of young adults, these making up 35.8% of the observed population compared to the middle age females at 42.9 %. The males identified range between adolescents, young adults and middle adults. The following is short description of the excavation results.

In the excavated tombs, the top of the burial shaft was only a few centimetres below the ground surface. The shaft was circular or nearly circular in shape and covered with a thin layer of yellow windblown sands, followed by a water deposited layer of clays and coarse sands. This happened in all plundered tombs and can possibly be explained by the action of water and wind as the graves were left open after plundering.

The outer surface shaft of the tombs was often surrounded by a ring of quartz pebbles, 10 to 20cm in width. Tomb T35 was surrounded by black granite stones.

**Burial traditions**

Information obtained from the well-preserved graves showed that, in general, the dead were laid down in oval-shaped pits, with a north-south orientation, head to the north, facing west, with contracted legs, and hands in front of the face. Grave goods included ceramic jars and bowls (not exceeding three pieces per grave). Almost all excavated graves yielded personal pieces of adornment, even in the fill of completely plundered tombs, particularly beads of faience, ostrich egg shell, and stone. In some case, the dead were wearing bracelets (leglets) on either both legs or one. Other objects found were iron arrowheads (e.g. T15), iron finger rings, and stone archer’s looses and one stone made amulet in T19.

**Figure 2:** Distribution of graves excavated in two seasons at Mansourkati cemetery DS 2.
In some tombs the dead were wrapped with animal skin, mainly sheep or goat of brown colour (e.g. T24), or cloth of unknown material (e.g. T78).

Description of the completely intact and partially intact excavated tombs:

Ds2T1: Burial pit was oval-shaped, 1.4m in depth. The dead was laid down in a north-south orientation, with bent legs, and slightly bent back, the head to the south and facing west. Three ceramic vessels were placed with the body: one large jar, with exterior matt impressed, near the folded legs; a medium red and undecorated bowl, behind the head; and a smaller brown bowl with broken rim. Ostrich egg shell beads were found around the wrist, and faience beads and ostrich egg shell beads were found around the neck.

Ds2T19: This mound was endangered by two roads that intersected inside the cemetery. The grave structure has a vertical circular shaft, surrounded by a ring of quartz pebbles, 30cm wide. The shaft ended with an oval-shaped burial pit, 1.42m wide and 1.63m in depth from the surface, that caved slightly all around. The nature of layers of unconsolidated gravels and fine sands made it difficult to clean the skeleton without damage. An iron arrow head was found in the fill at a depth of 1.2 meters. This grave was found intact. The body is placed with a north-south orientation, head to the south, facing west, legs and hands are bent, palms towards the face. The dead was wearing a stone archer’s loose on his finger, one arrow head was lying near the head, a small smoothed oval-shaped black stone was found behind the arms, a small shell amulet, that seemed to have been perforated, was near the skeleton (Figure 3), and a stone amulet was near the pelvis. Three ceramic vessels, two jars and one bowl, were placed around the head. Faience and white quartz beads were associated with the skeleton, as well as a number of unperforated egg-shaped quartz pebbles were collected from the pit; they are likely raw material to manufacture beads.

Ds2T24: The mound is located immediately south of the Islamic cemetery, a wooden post was erected on the mound to hang lights during burial rituals. The grave had
a vertical shaft that ended with an oval-shaped burial pit at 1.8m depth from the top and had a small curved niche on its western side. The tomb was well-preserved. The body was of a young individual, and similarly to those described above, laid with a north-south orientation, head to the south facing west, legs and arms bent, wrapped in an animal skin, likely sheep or goat. In front of the dead body was placed a mat-impressed ceramic jar, decorated with reed impression decorative elements on the shoulder, and one ceramic bowl with exterior mat-impression. The deceased was wearing faience and ostrich egg shell beads on the neck and right arm (Figure 5).

**DS2T79:** The fill of this mound is composed of very fine sand, clay and gravel. The shaft and burial pit were disturbed during plundering so it was not possible to define the shape of the shaft, but a preserved part of the burial pit showed that it was oval. Only the lower part of the skeleton is articulated, showing bent legs, again with a north-south orientation and head to the south. A complete ceramic bowl and a broken vessel but with a complete body were placed to the south, near the legs. Part of the skeleton was covered by brown color cloth, appearing that the body may have been wrapped by this material. Ostrich egg shell beads (the majority), faience, stone were collected around the disturbed skeleton.

**DS2T23:** The natural subsurface soil in this part of the cemetery is formed by relatively thin layers of unconsolidated gravels and thicker layers of very fine sands, silt and clays. This caused damage of the structure of the shaft due to the collapse of the materials during excavation. An articulated human skeleton, relatively well-preserved was found lying in an oval-shaped pit, 1.7m in depth, in similar position to those described above. However, in this case there were no accompanying ceramic
vessels. A necklace of ostrich eggshell (134 beads) and faience (52 beads) was found beneath the neck.

**DS2T80:** Located at the southwest area of the cemetery, near the Islamic graveyard, this mound is leveled with the ground, so it was difficult to recognize and was missed in the main plan. The filling of the grave and the subsurface soil were similar to those of grave 23. The structure of the grave had a vertical shaft that ended with an oval-shaped burial pit, at 1.8cm depth from the top surface. The body was lying again on a north-south orientation, legs bent with large angle, and back slightly bent, head towards the south. The head was displaced, with the lower jaw separated. The body had an iron leglet in each leg. A large number of beads, mainly faience, a few ostrich eggshell beads, and two beads, was found in the grave’s pit. Traces of wrapping cloth were also found around some parts of the body. Few undecorated sherds and stone tools were found in the fill of the upper levels.

**DS2T2:** This mound is located in the western part of the site, and it was 0.2m in elevation above the surrounding ground. The grave shaft was circular, containing an isolated human skull with few bones (clavicle bones) and some bone fragments at 0.47m depth in the fill. As the tomb was plundered, the burial pit was and its edges were only partially preserved, containing what was left of the skeleton in a disturbed state. only a small part was articulated, particularly femur and tibia, which are bent, showing that the individual was laid in a north-south orientation, with the head possibly to the south of the grave. An iron leglet was found on its left leg. Fifty cylindrically-shaped faience and one quartz shell have been collected from the grave pit. A broken red colored ceramic jar rested on the middle of the skeleton.

**DS2T6:** This low mound is located on the western part of the site, west of the new covered shelter in the Islamic graveyard. It has a circular, vertical shaft that ends on an oval-shaped pit, 2m deep. Only a human skull
was found in the upper level of the fill, and 3 vertebra bones in lower level.

**DS2T8:** This is one of better preserved mounds in the cemetery, reaching 8m in diameter and measuring 2m and 1.5m in elevation. The burial shaft was relatively larger in diameter and more than 2m in depth. It ended with a burial pit with a niche on its west side. A red slip ceramic sherd with eroded edges was found in the upper level of the structure’s fill and it was possibly reused as a tool. The skull was found in the upper level of the fill, while some bones were found disturbed in the pit and partially inside the niche.

**DS2T9:** The top of the structure is eroded and the mound is endangered by a road passing north of it. The grave was circular and the vertical shaft ended on a small pit with a small niche on its south side. Only a few bones were found in the fill of the shaft and remains of a disturbed skeleton in the niche.

**DS2T11:** This is one of the largest mounds in the cemetery, reaching one meter in elevation. An additional circular pit was dug immediately west of the circular grave shaft, but it was shallow (50cm). The function of this pit is not known, it was possibly used by robbers to enter the grave. This pit was about 1.9m deep. The shaft ended on small niche in the south side. Disturbed bone fragments were found inside and outside this niche-like structure. The bones were mixed with mud, as the grave was left open after plundering.

**DS2T12:** The structure of this mound is similar to T11: vertical shaft, sloping southward, an additional circular shallow pit to the west, and disturbed human
bones in the pit.

**DS2T13:** A circular shaft, relatively shallow, oval-shaped burial pit, disturbed human bones, beads and sherds were found in the fill.

**DS2T14:** A circular shaft, 1.47m deep, small niche to the south side.

**DS2T15:** The mound is located immediately to the south of the Islamic graveyard. The burial pit was oval, measuring 2.3x1.5m, with an east-west orientation, and, at a depth of 1.7m a step leading to it from the east. Subsurface, the upper level of the structure is surrounded by basalt stones, arranged on a semi-circle. The grave pit was also surrounded by basalt stones. The remains of a human skeleton were spread in the grave pit. A number of iron arrowheads (13) were found heaped in the south part of the pit. The pit also yielded a large number of faience beads (318), agate beads, and an iron finger ring.

**DS2T17:** This mound is located near the Islamic cemetery, and similarly to T15 it had basalt stones in the fill. This grave is different from others as it had a circular shaft that ended with a step leading to a niche, on the northern side. The only artifacts found were a few undecorated, pot sherds.

**Conclusion:**

In this excavation we found three different types of graves:

1- One type with oval-shaped vertical shaft, burial pit with a small niche, mostly on the south or west side. The bodies were buried with a north-south orientation (e.g. T1, T19, T78, T79, 24).

2- The second type has a vertical, circular shaft that ends on a niche on its south side (e.g. T11, T12, T8; Fig 3)

3- Vertical circular shaft, narrowing with depth, with small niche to the south, and usually deeper, reaching more than 2m (e.g. T7 and T9; Fig. 3)

The preservation of the burials was generally good although some skeletons were discovered incomplete as a result of looting in antiquity.

This cemetery can be compared with El Haraz cemetery in the fourth cataract region which has been dated to the late and post-Meroitic period, and also with sites excavated during the rescue archaeological project between Karima and Nawa on the opposite banks of river across from Mansourkatti cemetery (NCMA unpublished reports 2006-2009).

**Bibliography**

Fawzi Hassan


Mahmoud Suliman Bashir