The Meroitic Cemetery of Gereif East. A glance into the regional characteristics of Khartoum province

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Introduction

> "*L'occupation du sol à l'époque méroïtique dans la région du confluent des deux Nils* […] *demeure aujourd'hui une question peu étudiée*"
>
> (Geus and Lenoble 1983a, 9).

It was against this background that the French Archaeological Unit (now Section Française de la Direction des Antiquités du Soudan – SFDAS) started reconnaissance surveys in the Shendi and Khartoum regions in the late 1970s. The result was the discovery of a number of important sites: el-Hobagi, el-Kadada and Hosh el-Kafir to mention a few. Dated to the transitional phase between the Meroitic and Post-Meroitic periods, Patrice Lenoble integrated the findings from these sites into a remarkable synthesis of archaeological data by establishing the current research perspectives. In the course of these survey missions, a site was discovered near the quarry at Gereif East, some 11km upstream from Khartoum on the Blue Nile (Figure 1).

Following an initial research visit to confirm the variety of surface finds, most notably among these a bronze fragment decorated with lotus flowers, the mission conducted two seasons of excavation under the direction of Francis Geus and Patrice Lenoble between 1981 and 1983 (Leclant 1983, 530; 1984, 404-405; Geus 1982a, 34; 1983, 26-27; 1984, 12-13, 39, 74-75; 1986a, 32-33; 1986b, 72; Geus and Lenoble 1983a; 1983b; Lenoble 1989, 837-838). Having divided the site into four sections, they determined that it was composed of two Neolithic mounds and at least 11 Meroitic graves datable to the first few centuries AD.[1] Although the precise dating of the burials remains uncertain, given the preliminary nature of the investigation, these graves have produced fine objects such as beads, arrow heads, and painted and stamped pottery. In addition to the Neolithic and Meroitic burials, the mission discovered one Post-Meroitic burial containing four jars and eight handmade vessels in the western part of the site.

The Meroitic graves are of the simple pit type, some with a sloping entrance. However, what seems to be significant is that, with few exceptions, all of the skeletons were lying on their left side in a contracted position with the head oriented to the south. One of the exceptions is the Meroitic burial GRF 38, which contained an extended body accompanied with a copper-alloy bowl and a copper-alloy pitcher, the latter being comparable with one found at Sennar (Dixon 1963, pl. XLIX/b/A21637). Thus, it seems probable that the deceased was an individual of high status. Apart from this, however, the historical picture of Gereif East is still far from clear and needs further investigation as it remains one of the few cemeteries located on the Blue Nile and of those, one of the even fewer that has been excavated in any substantial manner. What follows, is an attempt to fill a gap in the existing body of archaeological literature by adding a small corpus of pottery in order to shed some light on the importance of Gereif East to the wider Meroitic context.

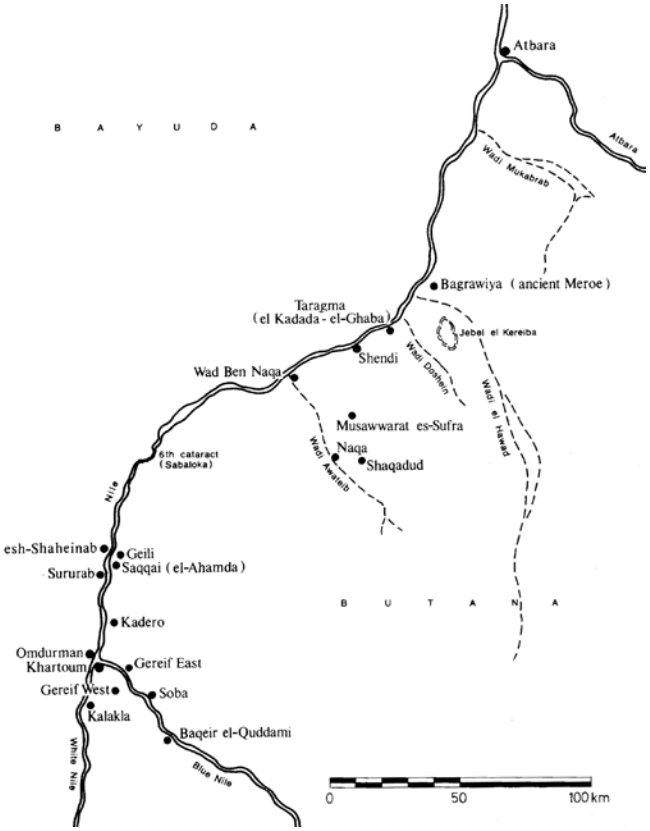

Figure 1. Sites in the Shendi and Khartoum provinces (after Geus 1984, 40).

Pottery from Gereif East

The pottery in question is the 12 handmade vessels which have been stored in the SFDAS (Figures 2-4). On the occasion of a research visit in 2011, an archaeological documentation of these vessels was made by the present author, the results of which are being published here for the first time. While the contexts of their discovery remain uncertain, the excavators' hand-written notes left inside the vessels confirm that they were discovered in the cemetery of Gereif East. The following list provides their basic information:

1: "*Fosse ad?*"
Dimensions: Height 337mm, Rim diam. 80mm, Body max. 262mm
Remark: a frieze of nested triangles runs around the shoulder. On the neck, the following motifs appear two times each: (1)

[1] Cf. however Török 1987, 196-197.

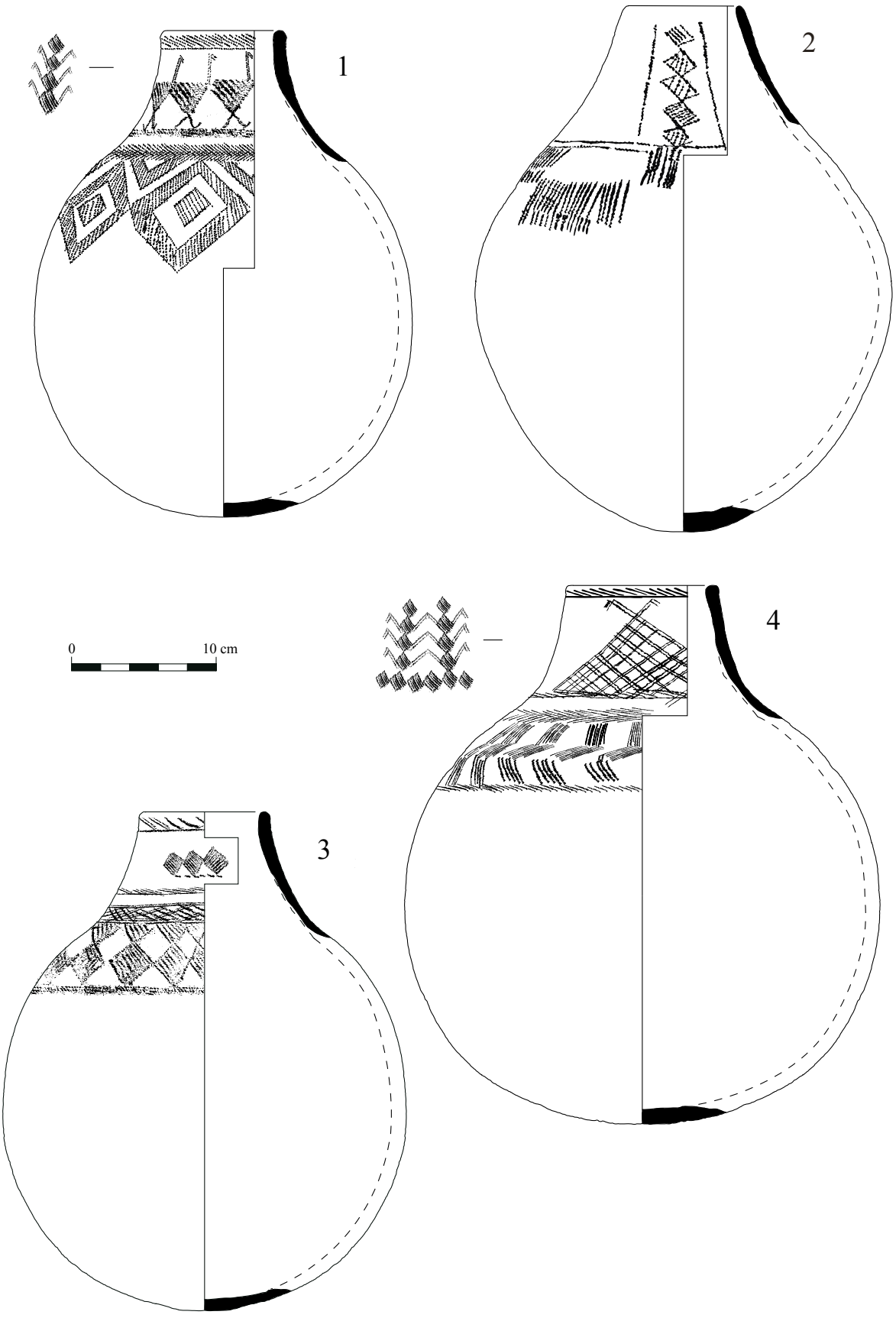

Figure 2. Handmade pottery from Gereif East (Nos 1-4) scale 1:4.

a column of lozenges with arm-like projectiles; (2) a row of four ostrich facing right.

2: "*Fosse ak*"
Dimensions: Height 365mm, Rim dia. 78mm, Body max. 290mm
Remark: a frieze of vertical strokes runs around the shoulder. On the neck, the following motifs appear three times each: (1) a column of five lozenges; (2) similar to the previous but separated by vertical lines. Black burnished.

3: "*Fosse nord No. 5*"
Dimensions: Height 345mm, Rim dia. 84mm, Body max. 280mm
Remark: a frieze of geometric designs runs around the shoulder. A spot on the neck is decorated by three lozenges.

4: "*Fosse 9*"
Dimensions: Height 372mm, Rim dia. 98mm, Body max. 330mm
Remark: a frieze of S-shaped motifs runs around the shoulder. On the neck, the following motifs appear two times each: (1) two columns of lozenges similar to no. 1, of which "projections" unite to form a chevron pattern connecting the lozenges and of which the fifth row forms a ring of connected lozenges; (2) a pyramid-shaped design crowned by two armed strokes (flags?).

5: GRF 7/1
Dimensions: Height 405mm, Rim dia. 86mm, Body max. 296mm
Remark: the bottom of the vessel is of convex shape. Undecorated.

6: GRF 48/1
Dimensions: Height 356mm, Rim dia. 92mm, Body max. 298mm
Remark: a frieze of nested triangles runs around the shoulder. On the neck, the following motifs appear two times each: (1) a column of lozenges, the three central of which have arm-like projectiles; (2) a row of four ostrich facing right.

7: GRF 52 "*Fosse ad*"
Dimensions: Height 281mm, Rim dia. 80mm, Body max. 266mm
Remark: a frieze of geometric designs runs around the shoulder. Black burnished.

8: GRF 75/1
Dimensions: Height 331mm, Rim dia. – (rim missing), Body max. 352mm
Remark: a red slip covers the outer surface down to the middle of the body of the vessel; the rim is missing. Undecorated.

9: GRF 75/2
Dimensions: Height 328mm, Rim dia. 62mm, Body max. 320mm
Remark: a red slip covers the outer surface down to the middle of the body of the vessel and the area inside the rim. Undecorated.

10: GRF 75/5
Dimensions: Height 393mm, Rim dia. 112mm, Body max. 366mm
Remark: a pot mark(?) is engraved on the shoulder. Undecorated.

11: GRF 75/6
Dimensions: Height 292mm, Rim dia. 114mm, Body max. 286mm
Remark: a red slip covers the outer surface down to the middle of the body of the vessel and the area inside the rim. Finger impressions are left at the base. Undecorated.

12: provenance not specified
Dimensions: Height 407mm, Rim dia. 86mm, Body max. 360mm
Remark: a complex design appears four times around the shoulder. Black burnished.

Discussion

If we exclude the vessel of unknown provenance (No. 12), all the rest can be divided into the following groups: *Fosses* (Nos 1-4); GRF 7 (No. 5); GRF 48 (No. 6); GRF 52 (No. 7); GRF 75 (Nos 8-11). Since none of these graves are mentioned in the excavation reports, it is difficult to date the vessels. Dating based upon the comb-impressed decorations – especially the lozenges with arm-like projectiles (Plate 1) – is also problematic, for there are only a few parallels known from the surrounding areas (Mahmoud el-Tayeb 1999, fig. 3/b. Cf. Dunham 1957, fig. 122; Caneva 1988, figs 27/b-c, 30; Török 1997, fig. 67/No. 6-1; Shinnie and Anderson 2004, pl. IXa/5; Afra Osman Abdalla 2004, 112-113).[2] It is remarkable, however, that a

Plate 1. Motif of lozenges with arm-like projectiles.

[2] Another example was discovered at Hillat Said in the White Nile region (see appendix). According to the excavator, this possibly Meroitic

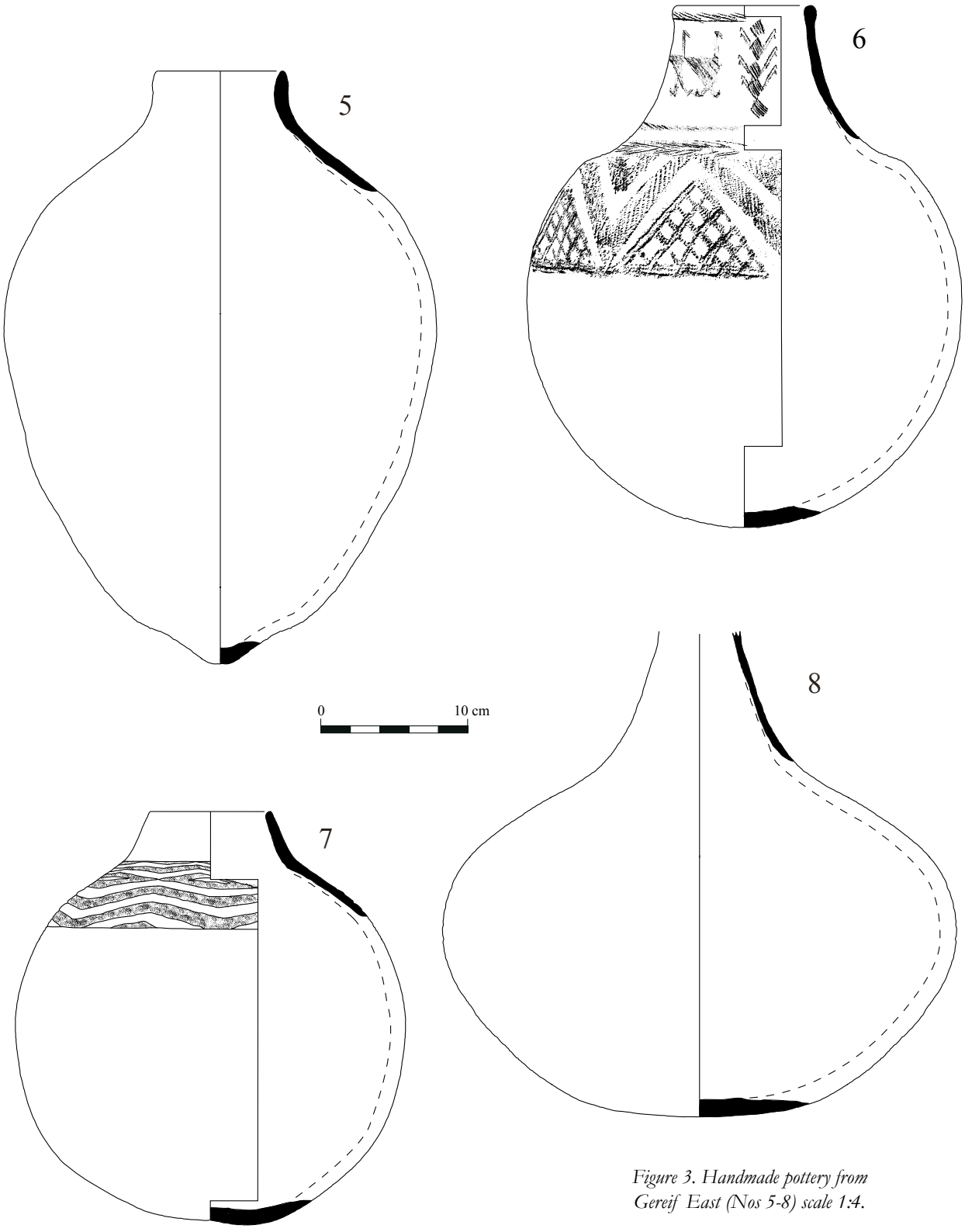

Figure 3. Handmade pottery from Gereif East (Nos 5-8) scale 1:4.

similar motif is tattooed on the deceased at Aksha (Vila 1967, 368-377; Lohwasser 2012, 533-543),[3] a Meroitic cemetery dated between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD. The tattoo design does not provide a useful chronological indicator as it is also found in the Post-Meroitic or Christian periods.

Be that as it may, it has been confirmed that GRF 75 corresponds to the alleged Post-Meroitic grave. This identification is based on a photograph taken in the field (Geus 1986a, pl. XVI/4), which clearly shows that the four excavated jars

jar was unearthed to the west of a contracted female laid in an oval pit (Khider Adam Eisa undated, 9).

[3] While the tattooed motif is usually considered as representing the god Bes, the fact that they are often based on the Basisform seems to point towards its interpretation as royal symbols (Török 1972, 42-43; cf. Kleinitz 2007, 100-104; 2009, 192-198).

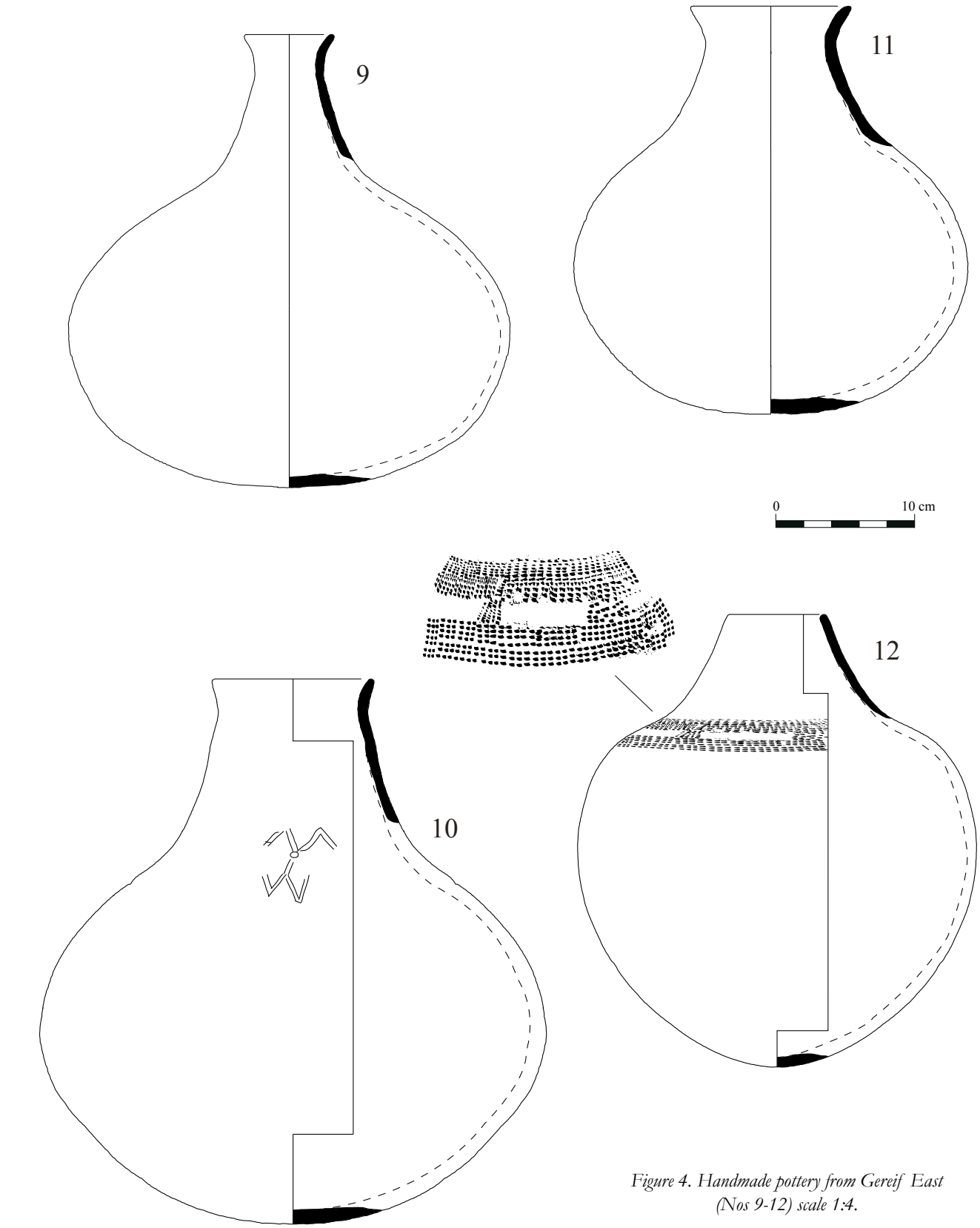

Figure 4. Handmade pottery from Gereif East (Nos 9-12) scale 1:4.

have the same shapes as those identified as coming from GRF 75. That being the case, it would seem that the eight other examples must be derived from the Meroitic graves. With this periodization in mind, let us now briefly examine the typological aspect.

Figure 5 shows the scatter-plots of the eleven vessels,[4] each diagram indicating their stylistic similarity calculated with the ratio of three basic elements: body diameter, rim diameter,

[4] The one missing rim is excluded (No. 8).

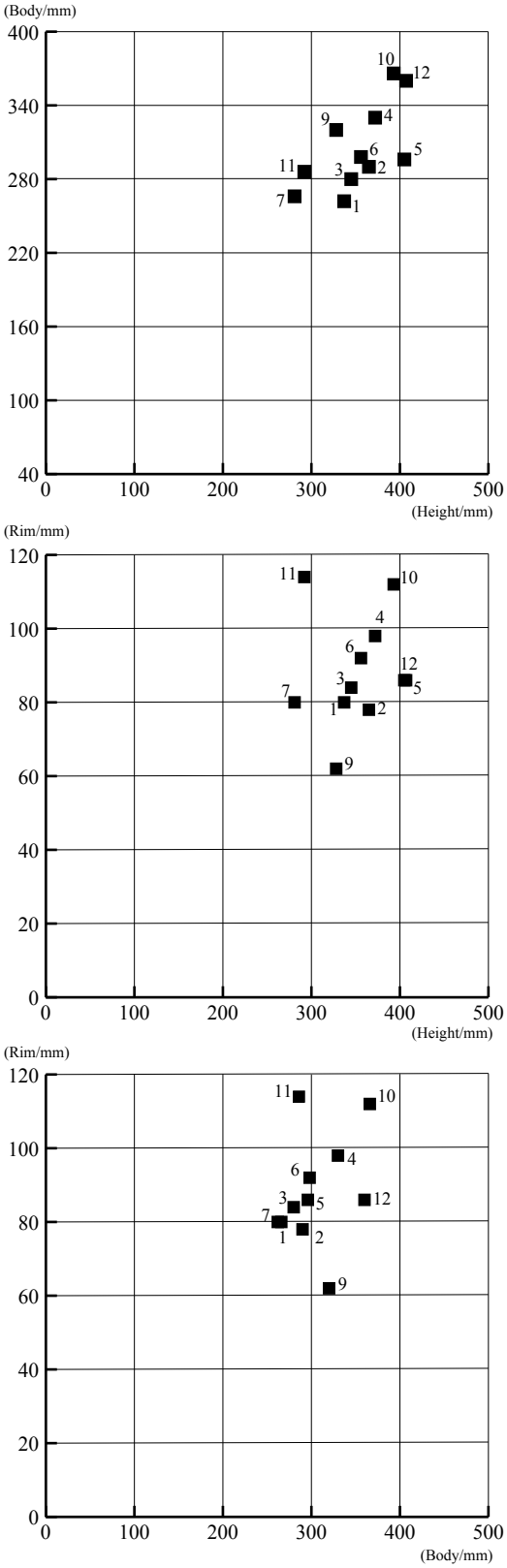

Figure 5. Scatter plots of pottery measurements.

and height. At first glance it does not show any significant result, but a closer look would reveal that four samples are slightly isolated from the main cluster (Nos 9-12). Since three of these were discovered in the above-mentioned Post-Meroitic grave, the remaining one (No. 12) might perhaps be attributed to the same period.[5] While this dating must be tested against other elements, e.g. pottery fabrics, the vessel is complete without fracture and makes difficult such an investigation.[6]

A careful observation of the vessels also reveals that they underwent a similar shaping process, as is suggested by physical traces left on their walls. In order to understand this, it suffices to look at another example (Figure 6).[7] Although this Late Meroitic jar sheds next to no information about Gereif East, it nevertheless makes us realize how many shaping methods can be found over the regions and how different they are, despite the similarity in pottery form. This is why an element such as shaping technique should be documented in much more detail so as to make systematic comparisons between sites possible (Usai *et al.* 2014, 192-194).

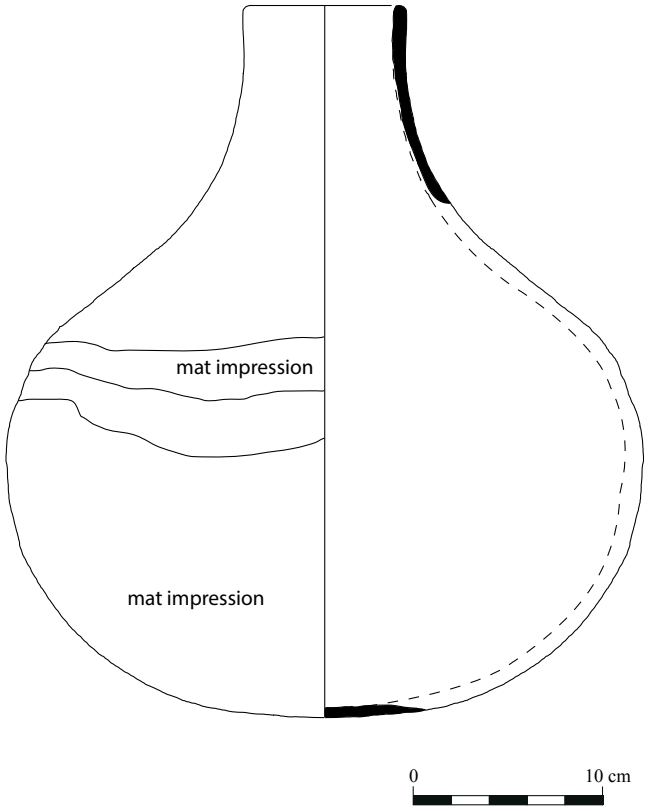

Figure 6. Meroitic pottery vessel from Gereif downstream of the Fifth Cataract (SNM 5766) scale 1:4.

It is worth noting here that a number of similar features have been noted in the Meroitic cemetery of Gabati (Edwards 1998, 199; 2004, 175); a pottery with frieze of ostriches is such an element. The most interesting phenomenon however appears to be its funerary practice according to which the body, as is observed in Gereif East, is laid in a contracted position

[5] Jars of this identical form can be found at Jebel Moya (Addison 1949, pl. CXIII/4-5).

[6] For a discussion on this line of research, see Edwards 2014, 54-56.

[7] SNM 5766. This jar was discovered by a local inhabitant in 1950, from a Meroitic grave downstream of the Fifth Cataract (a village also named Gereif!). In all probability, this grave is the one reported by Crawford (1953, 16).

with the head oriented to the south. This is so uniform that the assumption cannot be entirely mistaken that Gabati represents a necropolis of local community which maintained a regular contact with the royal necropolises. The Meroitic inscriptions, found on three jars (Edwards 2000, 43-45),[8] perhaps explain such a close relationship. That two of these were found together in a single grave (11B) is not a simple coincidence as the latter represents one of few graves containing an extended body in the east-west axial chamber. A combination of this observation with that at GRF 38 – of which extended burial was also found to be exceptionally rich – would thus indicate that the "Egyptianised" burial attitude was essentially reserved for a privileged social class.

A similar richness has also been observed by Francis Geus in the Meroitic cemetery of el-Kadada (Geus 1982b, 183). The difference however lies in the fact that most of the extended bodies are here buried, not in the east-west axial chamber, but in the grave oriented north-south and laying perpendicular to the sloping passage. If such structures are to be found further south until Khartoum province (e.g. Caneva 1994, 87, fig. 4), none of them seem to be associated, to the best of my knowledge, with the extended burial. It may thus be argued with good reason that there exists a significant difference between the regions to the north and to south of el-Kadada; it is not without real interest to recall that this cemetery remains the most southern necropolis of clearly Meroitic character, where a significant number of extended burials were discovered (see below).

To this brief paper must be added a final thought regarding the funerary practice of Gereif East. In this respect, it should be mentioned that Faisal Al-Sheikh Babiker already devoted a section of his unpublished thesis to the site and discussed it within the wider context of Khartoum province (Babiker 1984 III, 17-55). Based on the archaeological documentations made by the University of Khartoum in the 1970s, he rightly pointed out that the province is characterised by the conspicuous absence of extended and coffin burials. This is in contrast to the Shendi region where these burials tend to be more popular. Another feature that Gereif East may have in common with other cemeteries in the province was put forward by David Edwards in noting the presence of enclosure walls in several cemeteries of Khartoum province (Edwards 1989, 168).

At Gereif East, one such local element is indeed attested in the Meroitic grave GRF 38. Although the evidence is not conclusive, the following description is interesting from several points of view: "A superstructure, partly destroyed by plundering, is made of small stones arranged in an egg-shaped line (sic)" (Geus and Lenoble 1983b, 26). Echoed in the discovery at Sarurab/Bauda (Ahmed Mohamed Ali Hakem 1979, 153), and more recently at Jebel Sabaloka (Suková and Varadzin 2012, pl. 16), this egg-shaped stone core is usually found under the mound and seals the entrance pit of the grave.[9] Despite the scarcity of available information, a bibliographical survey reveals that similar stone cores are reported in the following graves (Table 1).

Table 1. Meroitic and Post-Meroitic graves sealed by the stone core.

Cemetery	Grave	Date	Bibliography
Jebel Sabaloka	Tumulus 1	Post-Meroitic	Suková *et al.* 2015, 74-75
Jebel Umm Marrihi	J.M. 8, 9-1, 16, 24, 26, 35, 44, 52, 72	Post-Meroitic	El-Hassan 2006
Bauda	B.80, 82.II, 84, 85, 86, 87, 89, 90, 93.III	Meroitic	Babiker 1984 I, 148-192
Zakiab	Z.1	Meroitic	Babiker 1984 III, fig. 5
Gereif East	GRF 38	Meroitic	Geus and Lenoble 1983b

The stone core in question is attested in five cemeteries. While their chronological positions are not necessarily without doubt, the Late Meroitic dating of Bauda is confirmed by two radiocarbon samples giving AD 260±80 and 220±70 (Babiker 1984 I, 137). It is, therefore, clear that this architectural element can be traced back at least into this period. What is surprising, then, is that no parallel exists at Meroe. The same holds true for el-Kadada (Lenoble 1994 I-II). Although the ground surface at el-Kadada had been heavily disturbed by modern activity, none of the more than one hundred excavated graves was found with a stone core. Furthermore, this cemetery also differs from the southern province in that it contains a number of extended burials (at least 22 individuals). Meroe and el-Kadada aside, it seems quite likely from these observations that, as is previously suggested, Khartoum province – including Gereif East – is involved in a strong local tradition of funerary practice.

Given this archaeological data from Gereif East, it is still difficult to assess what the implications of this outcome are in a wider context. One possibility might be the probable location of the southern frontier of the Meroitic Kingdom. While recent studies of Jebel Moya have produced fresh insights on this subject (Brass 2014; 2015b; cf. Brass and Schwenniger 2013, 470; Brass 2015a), they appear to include Khartoum province as a part of the Meroitic heartland (also Lohwasser 2014, 129). This view has nevertheless been questioned (Rondot 2014; Salvatori *et al.* 2014, 255), and it is in this direction that our outcome seems to provide a fruitful pathway for research. Would Khartoum province already be outside of the territory traditionally claimed by the Meroitic kings? What relationship would have been maintained with them? What would be the consequence of this scenario for the "End of Meroe"? The debate is ongoing, and different ways of thinking must be tested against the archaeological data. The broader implications of Gereif East thus voiced, it is hoped that this modest, but important piece of material provides a step toward a better understanding of Meroitic history.

[8] REM 1276-1278.

[9] A similar structure (Steinpackung) is found in the Late/Post-Meroitic graves at Musawwarat es-Sufra (Joachim 2014).

Acknowledgement
I owe a great deal to the following researchers for their kind assistance during my research trip to Sudan and for permitting me to publish the pottery presented here: Abdelrahman Ali Mohamed, Claude Rilly, David Edwards and Khider Adam Eisa. Any errors, and all opinions expressed, are of course the present author's responsibility.

Appendix: Jar found at Kawa – Hillat Said – Bir Ajab

David N. Edwards and Khider Adam Eisa

Handmade, quite irregular, with unsmoothed surfaces showing finger impressions (Figure 7). Fabric of fine medium brown silt with dark grey/black interior and mid-brown exterior. Some possible very fine organic temper (dung?). Elaborate decoration, impressed with a single point. Decoration on neck of stylised sorghum plants, with frieze of ostriches around shoulder, with human figures and geometric patterns below. H: *c.* 410mm; Rim Dia: *c.* 85mm.

This is a well-known form based on the bottle-gourd, commonly found in early Meroitic handmade and later wheel-made pottery. The decoration includes motifs also encountered in Meroitic contexts further north (e.g. Gabati) but these are usually comb-impressed or incised. The motifs are also identical to those of a series of tattoos/scarifications on (female) bodies found in Lower Nubia, north of the Second Cataract, dated to the late first millennium BC.

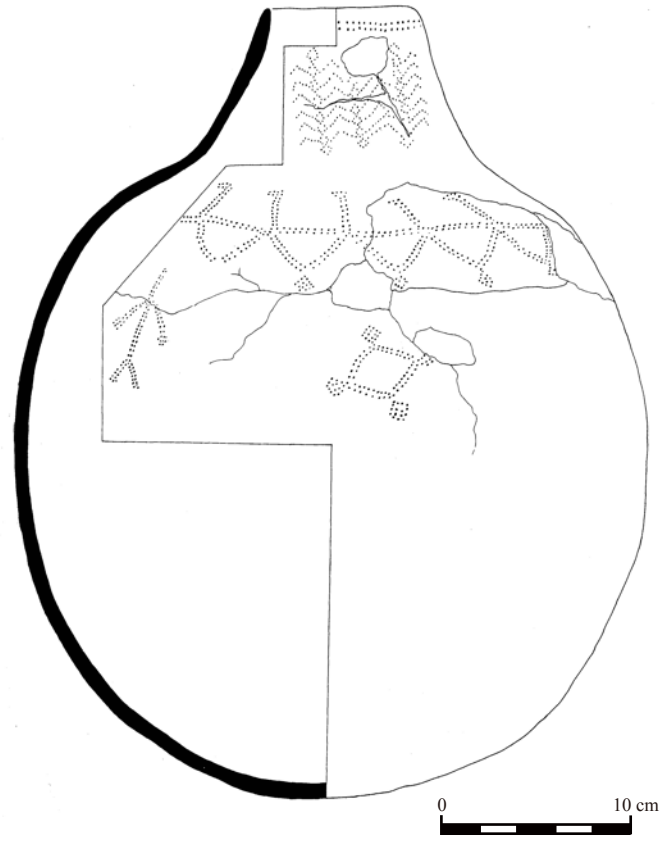

Figure 7. Meroitic pottery from Hillat Said, scale 1:4.

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