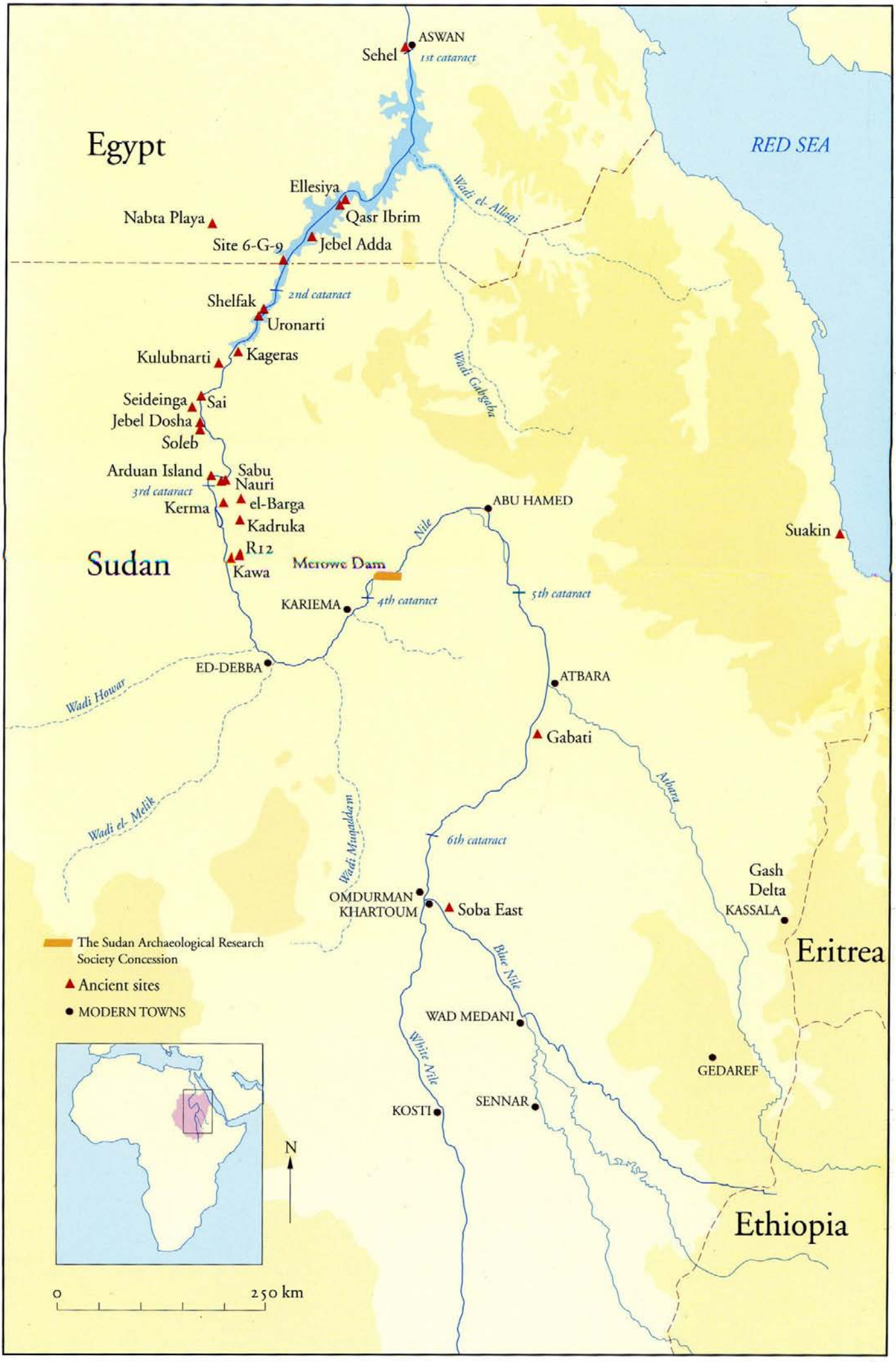
SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society

Bulletin No. 8 *2004*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Contents

Front Cover: Uronarti: view along 'Middle Street' towards the southern defences in March 2004 (photo Derek A. Welsby)

Late Antique Evidence in Eastern Sudan

Andrea Manzo

Introduction

The peopling of eastern Sudan in the first half of the 1st millennium AD has been outlined as a result of the research of the Italian Archaeological Expedition to Sudan (Kassala) of the Istituto Universitario Orientale,[1] led by Rodolfo Fattovich.

According to the proposed model (Fattovich 1987; 1989a; 1989b; 1990; Fattovich, Sadr, and Vitagliano 1988; Sadr 1986; see also Sadr 1991, 48-50, 55-59), the region between the Gash and Atbara Rivers was inhabited by semi-nomadic pastoral people of the Hagiz Group in the early 1st millennium AD. This cultural unit was recorded at 71 sites, which most likely were temporary villages located at the base of rock outcrops, or in open areas scattered between Jebel Mokram, to the east of the Gash River, and the Atbara. Ceramics of the Hagiz Group are characterised by impressed rim bands and decorative patterns made by finger-nail impressions. The presence of vessels with scraped surfaces, in the tradition of the earlier local cultures, shows a continuous development from the 7th millennium BC onward.

The Hagiz Group culture ended in the 3rd-4th centuries AD when a new cultural unit, the Khatmiya Group, appeared in the region. This culture is recorded at five cemetery sites along the western side of Jebel Taka and two near Jebel Mokram. Compared to the earlier Hagiz Group, the scarce evidence of the Khatmiya Group suggests that in this period the region was relatively uninhabited. Tumuli of the Khatmiya Group are *c.* 3-10m in diameter, and cover cylindrical pits closed by stone slabs. Although economic evidence is lacking, this culture could possibly be ascribed to people with a mixed herding-farming economy, given that the cemeteries are located on the edge of potentially rich agricultural land by the Gash River or to a very mobile group with a pastoral economy, given the lack of habitation sites. The origins of these people are uncertain, but it has been suggested that the culture is related to contemporary ones in central Sudan, especially given the presence of tumuli of Post-Meroitic types in the Gash region, most likely of nomadic and semi-nomadic groups. Pottery traits suggest links with central Sudan, the Nile Valley, and the Ethiopian highlands.

The evidence on which the model has been based is admittedly scarce and the region deserves further investigation. Nevertheless, some new insights have been gained as a result of the 1994 and 1995 field seasons of the Italian Archaeological Expedition and ongoing analyses on the ceramics of these phases.[2]

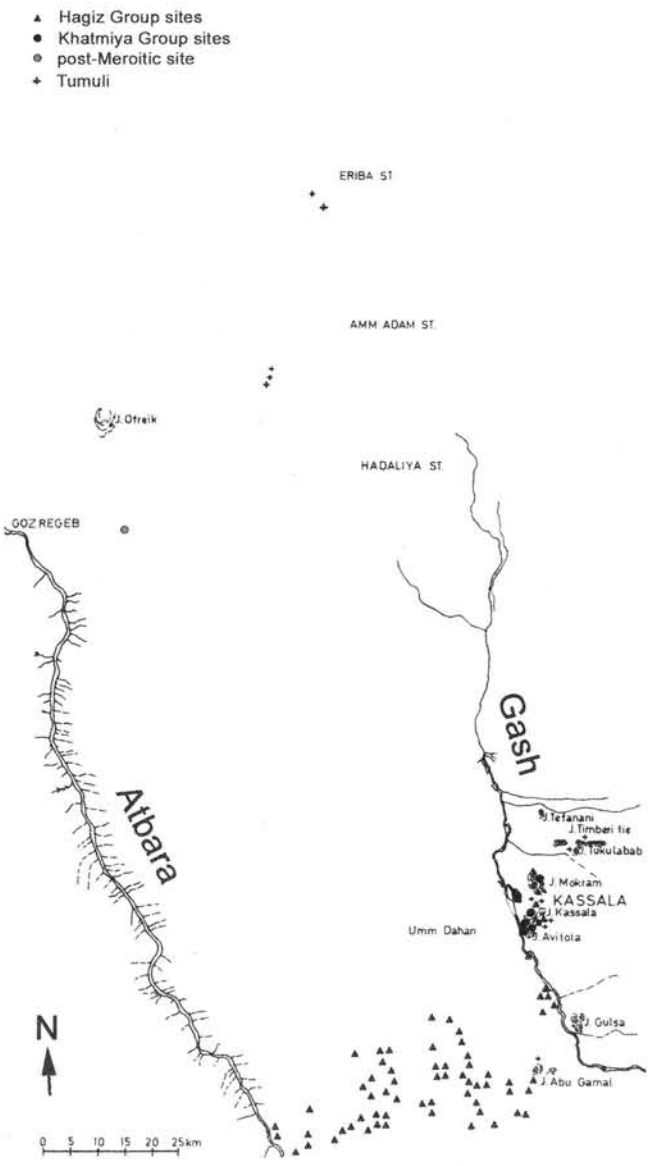


Figure 1. Map of the region with the Jebel Ofreik Post-Meroitic site and the Khatmiya Group sites.

A Post-Meroitic site east of the Atbara River

In the 1995 field season a site was investigated to the east of Goz Regeb on the River Atbara and southeast of Jebel Ofreik, a hill in the steppe region between the Gash Delta and the Atbara (Figure 1). The site was investigated at this time because local people had reported that bones and large fragments of pottery were visible on the surface there as a result of erosion, probably due to strong winds.

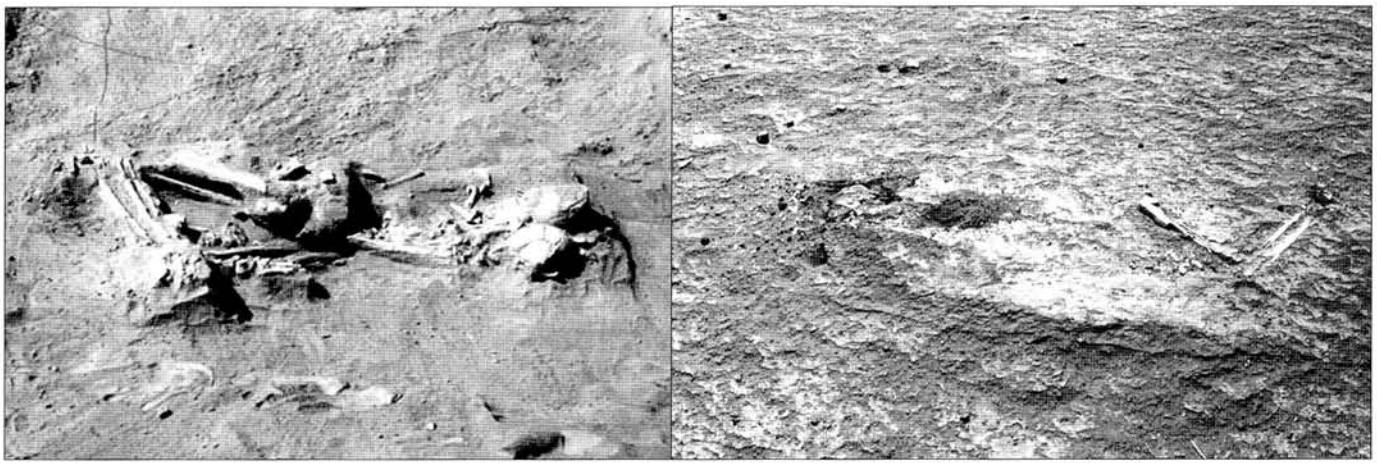
This site covered an area of *c.* 900m^2. On the surface were large fragments of pottery and remains of at least two

[1] Now the University of Naples "L'Orientale". The expedition was directed by Rodolfo Fattovich and was funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche.

[2] These analysis were supported in 1998 by the Michaela Schiff Giorgini Foundation.

or three human skeletons in a contracted position (Plates 1 and 2). The presence of almost complete pots strongly suggests that they were grave goods from a funerary context.

Among the ceramics from the Jebel Ofreik site was a dark brown, hand-made burnished globular vessel with high conical neck and everted rim, which is a typical beer jar ("bonbonne") (Figure 2). Beer jars are widely distributed in central Sudan and have also been recorded at Umm Sunt on the Blue Nile (Edwards 1991, fig. 5); in the immediate environs of Meroe, in the Middle and Northern Necropolis (Török 1997a, fig. 144, 4, 7, 8, 11-13, 35); and in the surrounding region of the capital of the Kushite kingdom (Lenoble 1991, 170, fig. 5, 3; 1992). This type of jar has also been found in Upper Nubian cemeteries (Jacquet-Gordon and Bonnet 1971-1972, 82), and in Lower Nubia (Adams 1986, 423-424, fig. 250 W 36). Because of its widespread distribution and its characteristic features, this type of jar has been used as a marker for the Post-Meroitic phase in the entire region (Lenoble 1992, 83-90; Jacquet-Gordon and Bonnet 1971-1972).



Plates 1 and 2. Remains of two human skeletons in a contracted position associated with large fragments of pottery on the surface at Jebel Ofreik.

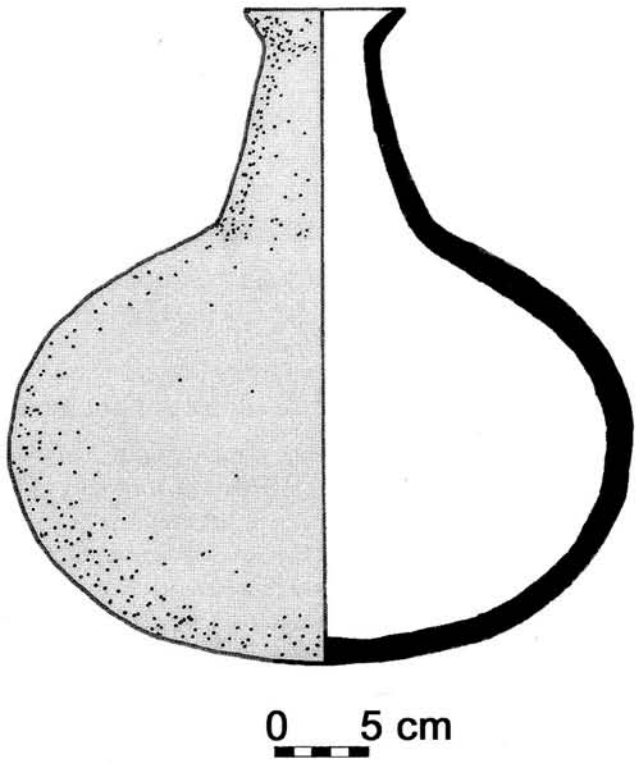


Figure 2. A typical beer jar with dark brown burnished surfaces from Jebel Ofreik.

A second small hand-made, unburnished red beer jar was also recorded at the Jebel Ofreik site. It is similar to examples found near Sennar on the Blue Nile, which date to the Post-Meroitic period (Edwards 1991, 44, 53, pl. III, KA0061). Other similar examples from el-Kadada in the Middle Nile region date to the same periods (Lenoble 1992, pl. I, KDD 33/1).

A third hand-made brown beer jar from the site had molded decoration, with impressed decoration at the base of the neck (Plate 3). These types of decoration have been recorded on pots found in Post-Meroitic tombs of the Middle and Northern Necropolis at Meroe (Török 1997a, fig. 144, 2-3), and in a Post-Meroitic tumulus at Kabbashi

Plate 3. A beer jar with dark brown burnished surfaces and molded and impressed decoration at the base of the neck from Jebel Ofreik.

(Caneva 1993, fig. 6a).

The contracted burials lying on their right side at the Jebel Ofreik site are consistent with burial patterns of cemeteries in the Middle Nile and Upper Nubia dating to the 3rd-4th centuries AD (Jacquet-Gordon and Bonnet 1971-1972, 82). The position of the skeletons is also similar to burials excavated in two tumuli at Mahal Teglinos, near Kassala, which contained semi-flexed bodies with few personal ornaments (Fattovich 1989a, 800-802; 1989b, 114-115). Possibly the Jebel Ofreik burials were originally marked by tumuli that have now disappeared. Subsequently, the upper parts of the burial pits were destroyed by severe erosion, revealing grave goods and skeletons. Future analysis of other possibly Post-Meroitic tumuli already recorded in the Gash Delta (see Fattovich 1989a, 801-802; 1989b, 114-115; 1990, 24) may demonstrate the probable link between these funerary structures and Post-Meroitic pottery.

All of the recorded burial traits at Jebel Ofreik seem to suggest that the site dates to Post-Meroitic times. As noted above, only scattered evidence of clearly Post-Meroitic remains has been recorded to the east of the Atbara River (Lenoble 1992, 81; Fattovich 1989a, 802), but at the Jebel Ofreik site there seems to be a consistent Post-Meroitic ceramic assemblage. This is the first evidence that a human group characterised by the same general cultural traits of the Post-Meroitic in the Middle Nile Valley was present in the Kassala region of eastern Sudan, and the Jebel Ofreik site seems to be the easternmost site of Post-Meroitic date. The Post-Meroitic cultural traits at Jebel Ofreik not only demonstrate the already suggested diffusion of cultural elements from the Middle Nile into eastern Sudan in the 4th-5th centuries AD (Fattovich 1987; 1989a; 1989b; 1990), but also help to interpret the cultural and historical meaning of this evidence.

The eastern frontier of the Kushite kingdom is still unknown (see Welsby 1996, 59-62). It has been stated that the region of the Atbara River lays outside of the kingdom (O'Connor 1993, 73), and at present Meroitic remains have not been discovered in this region. The Jebel Ofreik evidence, however, suggests that in the 4th-5th centuries AD human groups with Post-Meroitic cultural traits were present in the Kassala area. These people were probably herders who moved into the steppe region after the rainy season and then returned to areas near permanent water sources (the Atbara?) during the dry season.

Possibly groups east of the Atbara with Post-Meroitic culture traits were also involved in trade with the Red Sea coastal region, as the Jebel Ofreik site is not far from Goz Regeb, a traditional ford for tracks between the Butana and the coast (Monneret de Villard 1938a, 323). Tracks between parts of the Nile Valley which were controlled by the Kushite kingdom and the Red Sea coast were recorded by Pliny the Elder (*Nat.Hist.*, VI, 35, 189), and perhaps by Seneca (*Nat. Quaest.*, IV A, 2, 4, but *contra* De Nardis 1989, 131-132) in the 1st century AD. Given the trading and diplomatic relationships between Rome and Meroe, the 1st century AD references in Latin writers suggest that at least at that time Kushite rulers had some interest in these tracks (Manzo 1996, 46-47, 77 note 64). The occurrence of Post-Meroitic remains at Jebel Ofreik perhaps points to the continued use of these tracks in later phases.

Archaeological evidence of groups with Post-Meroitic culture east of the Atbara and in the Eritrean-Sudanese lowlands might be associated with the expansion of peoples from the Nile Valley, possibly referred to in an Aksumite inscription of King Ezana which dates to the 4th century AD (Bernand *et al.* 1991, n. 189, 262-267, 271, 370-372). This inscription praises the intervention of Aksumite troops against the Noba, who were ravaging their neighbors and others such as the Barya (Bernand *et al.* 1991, 263, line 9). Evidence at Jebel Ofreik of Post-Meroitic peoples may possibly be explained by these conflicts. At the same time the presence of people of the Hagiz Group, the last culture related to the Atbai Ceramic Tradition in the Kassala region, ended in the 3rd-4th centuries AD, and there is no continuity with the later cultures of the Eritrean-Sudanese lowlands (Fattovich 1989b, 111, 125; 1990, 22, 35-36). Based on archaeological and historical evidence, Fattovich (1994) has identified the Hagiz Group with the later Cunama in Eritrea/Ethiopia, and has located the culturally related Barya between the Atbara and the Gash Rivers. Thus, clashes between the Barya and Noba, as recorded in Aksumite royal inscriptions, probably relate to the groups of people that Fattovich has identified, and to the ones that are archaeologically visible in the Post-Meroitic evidence east of the Atbara at Jebel Ofreik.

New comparisons for the Khatmiya Group ceramics

Other developments in eastern Sudan in the 3rd-5th centuries AD can also be suggested, based on a new analysis of the Khatmiya Group, the cultural unit of the region during this period. Earlier analysis suggested that because of similarities in the ceramics, the Khatmiya Group had cultural links with central Sudan, the Nile Valley, and the Ethiopian highlands (Fattovich 1989a, 800; 1989b, 112; 1990, 23). In 1993-1994 the Italian Archaeological Expedition to the Sudan (Kassala) excavated site K 5, near the Khatmiya mosque, at the western foothill of Jebel Taka, which had already been recorded as a Khatmiya Group site (Figure 1). Although the excavated structures were heavily disturbed by 19th century re-use of the area, the ceramic corpus of the Khatmiya Group has been greatly enlarged by the new material.

Pottery of the Khatmiya Group (Figure 3, Plates 4 and 5) is characterised by a distinctive hand-made ware with a very compact paste that is homogeneous in color, and a mineral temper. The surfaces are well burnished, with incised and, more frequently, impressed punctate decoration, sometimes with white and/or red paste in the decoration.

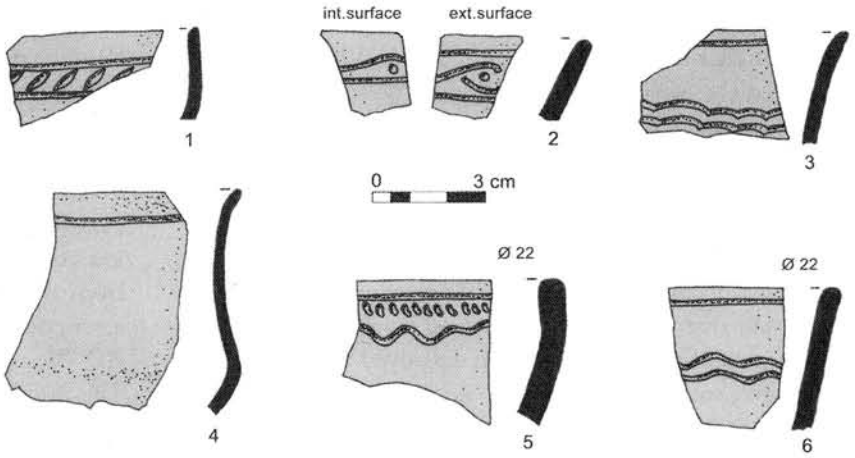


Figure 3. Decorated sherds from the Khatmiya Group site K 5, all from SU1 except for 2 from surface. 1- burnished gray internal surface, burnished/polished gray external surface, dark gray paste with thin low density vegetal and mineral inclusions (including sand?); 2- gray burnished surfaces, brown paste with thin low density vegetal inclusions, red and white paste in the incisions and impressions on both surfaces; 3- brown burnished surfaces and reddish paste with a gray core with thin low density mineral inclusions (sand ?); 4- reddish polished surfaces and reddish paste with a gray core and thin low density mineral inclusions (sand ?); 5- reddish burnished surfaces and a reddish paste with gray core and thin low density mineral inclusions (including sand ?); 6- brown burnished surface and a red paste with gray core and thin low density mineral inclusions (including sand ?).

The decorative geometric patterns consist of horizontal lines under the rim and parallel to it, impressed wavy lines or "running dog" patterns parallel to the rim, impressed rim bands sometimes framed by incised lines, or triangular impressed panels on the central part of the body alternating with undecorated fields. Frequently, the same pot is decorated with a combination of patterns. The main forms are cups and bowls of medium dimensions (from 10 to 22cm in diameter), which are sometimes carinated.

Study of the K 5 materials has provided new comparative material for analysis of Khatmiya ceramics. Close parallels to several Khatmiya Group types can be found in a well-defined class of materials first discovered in Lower Nubia in the Dodecaschoinos, at Kalabsha-North (Cemeteries A, B, C, and E), Umbarkab, Kalabsha-South, and Wadi Qitna (Strouhal 1982; 1984, 157-177).

Cylindrical cups and beakers from K 4, K 5, and K 26 (Figure 3, Plate 4) are similar to class H1 of Strouhal (1984, 162) and Barnard (2002, fig. 3, EDW 58, n.d.) from Lower Nubia. The Khatmiya Group decorations seem to be less varied than the Lower Nubian examples (see Strouhal 1984, 165-168), and are usually limited to horizontal incised lines under the rim and near the carination, although examples with wavy incised patterns near the carination and a band of oblique comb impressions framed by horizontal incised lines were also recorded.

Globular bowls from sites K 4, K 5, K 24, and K 26 (Figure 3, 1-3, 5-6; Plate 5) are similar to class H2 bowls of Strouhal (1984, 162-165) and Barnard (2002, fig. 2, EDW 39, 35, 33, 40, 36, 32; fig. 3, EDW 56, 61, 63, 57, n.d.). The decorations are more ornate and varied than in those of the cylindrical cups and beakers. Decorative patterns include horizontal impressed and incised wavy bands; triangles and lozenges formed by comb impressions, and, rarely, by incisions; impressed oblique rim bands; horizontal incised lines; and "running dog" incised or impressed patterns. Usually, several of these patterns are used together and combined in horizontal bands, which alternate with undecorated areas. Sometimes impressed geometric deco-

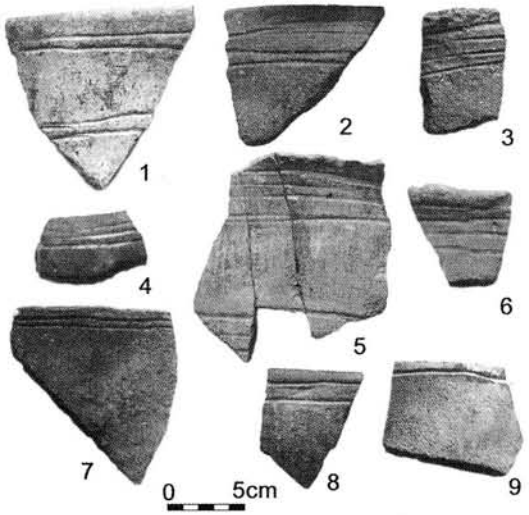


Plate 4. Cylindrical cups and beakers from Khatmiya Group sites, 1-2, 4-6, and 8 from K 5; 3, 7, and 9 from K 4.

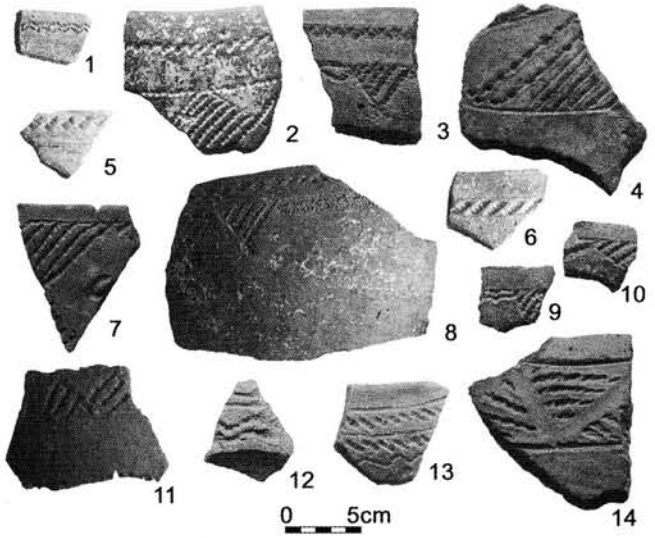


Plate 5. Globular bowls from Khatmiya Group sites, 1-11, and 14 from K 5; 12-13 from K 24B.

rations are also arranged in vertical bands. The decorative patterns may be filled in with red- or white-coloured paste. These more ornate decorations are similar in technique, patterns, and general arrangement to ceramic decorations described by Strouhal (1984, 165-168) and Barnard (n.d.).

Two main types of Khatmiya pottery are associated with fragments of everted rims, of small and medium-sized bottles. There is no evidence that these vessels were decorated, but the excavated sherds were always very small.

Study of the pottery from Kalabsha-South and Wadi Qitna resumed after the discovery of similar ceramics at Berenike and in the surrounding region, which Barnard recently named Eastern Desert Ware, dating to the 4th-5th centuries AD. According to Barnard (2002; n.d.), these vessels were produced and used by indigenous, nomadic inhabitants of the desert.

This type of pottery has been found in the Eastern Desert, between the Nile and the Red Sea, in southern Egypt and northern Sudan. In Lower Nubia a few fragments of this pottery have been identified at Sayala Weinstuben (Kromer 1967, 96-99, Taf. 2, 32-2, 34-3, 37-5), at the North-cemetery and at burial complexes C I-III at Sayala (Badawi 1976, 29-31, 112-114, Abb. 12, Taf. 2), and at Wadi el-Arab (Emery and Kirwan 1935, 108-122, fig. 89, S 4-S 6; fig. 94, 1; fig. 99, 5; fig. 103, 13; fig. 105, 4). More recently, ceramics that are very similar to the Khatmiya Group in terms of shape, decoration, and ware have been discovered at Qasr Ibrim in Lower Nubia, in the Eastern Desert near Jebel Zabara (Rose 1995, 41) and at sites in the Mons Smargadus area (Barnard 2002, 53, fig. 2), and at Berenike near Ras Banas on the Egyptian Red Sea coast (Rose 1995, pls 17-18; Barnard 2002, 53, fig. 3; n.d.). This type of pottery has also been collected at several sites in the Berenike area (Barnard 2002, 53), and a few sherds were found at Quseir el-Qadim (Tomber pers. com.). Sherds ascribed to this ware have been discovered at Tabot, near Khor Nubt (Anwar A. Magid *et al.* 1995, 169-170, pls IVb, Va). The discovery of the same type of pottery was also noted at Kurgus in Upper Nubia, among the materials classified as Post-Meroitic discovered in the pre-fort levels (Barnard 2002, 53, n.d.; Welsby Sjöström 2001, 59, Fig. 3) and in Post-Meroitic burials near et-Tereif above the Fourth Cataract (Welsby pers. comm.). Published pottery from the Wadi Allaqi, however, seems to be different in shape and decoration from Eastern Desert Ware (*contra* Barnard 2002, 53, n.d.; and in agreement with Rose 1995, 41). The Wadi Allaqi pottery is also different from the Khatmiya Group ceramics, as it is decorated with incised panels and lacks the typical impressed patterns and carinated shapes (see Castiglioni *et al.* 1997; Sadr *et al.* 1995, 221, figs 25-26).

Possibly the Khatmiya Group represents the southernmost evidence of the culture characterised by Eastern Desert Ware, which is distributed from the southern Red Sea coast in Egypt and Lower Nubia, to Khor Nubt and the Eritrean-Sudanese lowlands.

Although Eastern Desert Ware seems to be present over a very large region, it represents a minority component of the ceramic assemblages at several sites where it has been recorded (Barnard 2002, 54). In the case of the Khatmiya Group sites and at Tabot, however, this pottery seems to represent the core component of the assemblages. In the Khatmiya Group sites, the context for this pottery consists of cemeteries with tumuli (Fattovich 1989a, 799; 1989b, 112; 1990, 23). At Tabot, Eastern Desert Ware seems to be associated with earthen platforms, bones of cattle and ovicaprids, desiccated faeces of sheep and/or goat, and grinding stones, most likely for grinding cereals (Anwar A. Magid *et al.* 1995, 169-170). A cemetery with tumuli most likely associated with the pre-Islamic use of the site was, however, also recorded at Tabot (*ibid.*, 170, 177). Based on the published evidence, Eastern Desert Ware seems to represent the major component of the assemblage, although some wheel-made sherds, perhaps associated with a different (Islamic?) period, were noticed as well (*ibid.*, 169, 177).

At Kalabsha-South and Wadi Qitna, Eastern Desert Ware was found in a cemetery with tumuli (Strouhal 1982, 1984), but it was associated with a larger component of red and brown Lower Nubian, Post-Meroitic wares (Strouhal 1984, 103).

The dating of Eastern Desert Ware at different sites is based on its association with other well-dated ceramics, and a few radiocarbon dates. At Berenike, the associated material and radiocarbon dates suggest a dating to the 4th-6th centuries, with possible precursors as early as the 2nd century AD (Barnard n.d., 2002, 53; Sidebotham and Wendrich 1995, 105). For the cemeteries at Kalabsha-South and Wadi Qitna, imported materials and radiocarbon dates suggest a dating to the mid-3rd to the late 5th centuries AD (Strouhal 1984, 265-266), but a reconsideration of the evidence suggests a more narrow dating to the early 4th- early 5th centuries AD (Rose 1995, 41). At Tabot (Anwar A. Magid *et al.* 1995, 170) and in the sites K 4 and K 24 of the Khatmiya Group (Fattovich 1989a, 800; 1989b, 112; 1990, 24), this pottery is associated with Late Roman Mediterranean, ribbed amphora body sherds, which can be roughly dated to the 4th-6th centuries AD (see Peacock and Williams 1986, 185-187, 191-192, 204-207) (Plate 6, 1-2). Some similarities to Late Meroitic or Post-Meroitic pottery noted in two cups discovered at the Khatmiya site K 4 (Fattovich 1989a, 800; 1989b, 112) appear to confirm this dating, as well as the discovery at the Khatmiya sites K 4, K5, and K 6 of mat-impressed, Late Meroitic or Post-Meroitic pottery (Plate 6, 3-6).

It has been suggested that the Kalabsha tumuli associated with Eastern Desert Ware can be ascribed to the Blemmyes (Strouhal 1984, 270), whose most important centre was Kalabsha, according to historical sources (Emery and Kirwan 1935, 268; Ricke 1967, 41). As pointed out by Barnard (2002, 55), the presence of Eastern Desert Ware at several sites in the Mons Smargadus area, where, accord-

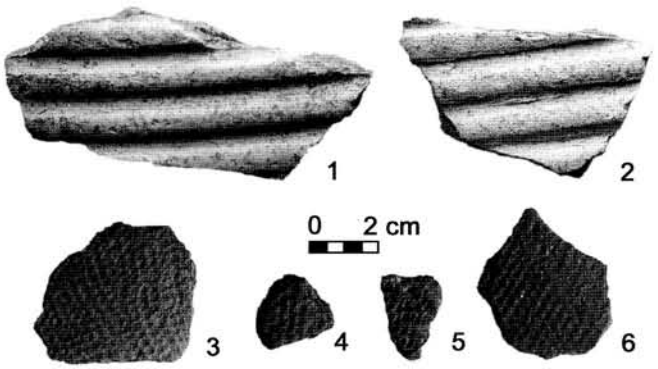


Plate 6. 1-2 fragments of Mediterranean ribbed amphorae from Khatmiya Group site K 24C; 3-6 Late Meroitic or Post-Meroitic mat-impressed pottery from Khatmiya Group site K 4.

ing to Olympodorus, a Blemmyan kingdom existed in the 5th century AD, might support this hypothesis. The paucity of Eastern Desert Ware, however, at other sites recorded by historical sources as Blemmye centers, such as Qasr Ibrim (Strouhal 1982, 218; Rose 1995, 43), suggests that this hypothesis is problematic.

Recently, a more generic attribution of Eastern Desert Ware to "Eastern Desert Dwellers" has been suggested. At Berenike this pottery is associated with a large quantity of ovicaprid bones, and textiles and rope made of ovicaprid hair, which suggests a desert-oriented culture of nomadic peoples (Barnard n.d.; Barnard 2002, 53-54; Sidebotham and Wendrich 1995, 106). The large number of stone ring cairns recorded west of Berenike can be compared to the tumuli in the region of Deraheib in the Eastern Desert, and those of Wadi Qitna in Lower Nubia, which have been ascribed to peoples of the Eastern Desert, possibly to be identified with the Blemmyes (Kennedy n.d.). Although at present the label of "Eastern Desert Dwellers" seems to be the more prudent one, the occurrence of Eastern Desert Ware in the Berenike area and in Lower Nubia seems to fit very well chronologically with what is known from historical sources about the Blemmyes in these areas from the mid-3rd to the mid-6th centuries AD (Török 1984; Updegraff 1988, 45, 68-76).

The occurrence of Eastern Desert Ware in eastern Sudan does not contradict the link between it and the Eastern Desert dwellers on one side and the Blemmyes and the Bega, two related groups, if not the same people (Desanges 1978, 359, note 310), on the other. Actually Eastern Desert people could have been present in eastern Sudan in the first centuries AD, and they may be related to the presence of Bega groups in the area, which have been recorded in 4th century inscriptions of the Aksumite King Ezana (Bernand *et al.* 1991, n. 185, 241-245, n. 185 bis, 246-250, n. 270, 363-367, n. 270 bis, 367-370; Zaborski 1967), and thus to the Blemmyes. The large geographic areas inhabited by these groups might also explain the few regional differences in the material culture, as noted above.

The occurrence of sherds of ribbed amphorae at Tabot and at Kassala in the Khatmiya Group assemblages seems to suggest that peoples associated with Eastern Desert Ware were involved in an extensive network of contacts. Tabot is located on a traditional east-west track from the Nile Valley to the Red Sea used by the Bega (Monneret de Villard 1938a, 324), which also leads to the well known ancient gold mining areas of Khor Nubt (the literature is extensively cited in Oman 1998, 29-52). Ancient links between Tabot and the Red Sea coast are demonstrated by the sea shells that have been collected at the site (Anwar A. Magid *et al.* 1995, 170). Kassala is also located along traditional east-west tracks to the Red Sea coast from the Butana, crossing tracks which lead to Aksum-Adwa and Gondar on the Ethiopian plateau (Manzo 1999, 12-13).

The fragments of ribbed amphorae at Tabot and Kassala also suggest that there were links with regions where such imported materials occurred at that time, i.e., Lower Nubia (Adams 1986, 60, 538-546, 562-568, 580-583, fig. 305, Z 4-6; fig. 315, Z 3-3 A; fig. 319, U 3); Egypt, including the Red Sea coast (Hayes 1996, 159-161); and Ethiopia (Wilding 1989, 314, fig. 16, 468-470). The paucity of materials imported from the Mediterranean in Upper Nubia and central Sudan in the 4th-6th centuries AD (Jacquet-Gordon and Bonnet 1971-1972, 82-83; Lenoble 1992, 82) suggests that at that time the southern Nile Valley was bypassed not only by the maritime trade but also by an efficient overland track. This distribution of imported materials may be related to the track used for direct communication between Aksumite Ethiopia and Egypt, mentioned by an unknown late 3rd century Aksumite king in the *Monumentum Adulitanum* (Bernand *et al.* 1991, n. 277, 378-382) and later on by the 6th century writer Cosmas Indicopleustes (*Top. Christ.*, II, 48, 7). Noteworthy is the mention of groups of Bega and Blemmyes as some of the peoples that the anonymous Aksumite king suppressed in order to open tracks to Egypt, in a gloss to the codex of Cosmas Indicopleustes, with the text of the *Monumentum Adulitanum* (Conti Rossini 1922, 123; Monneret de Villard 1938b, 26). The main route to Egypt may have crossed the Eastern Desert, or it may have been a coastal track with several branches to the Nile and mining areas, perhaps following the same tracks that connected Ethiopia and Egypt at the end of the Middle Ages (Monneret de Villard 1938a, 322).

Final Remarks

Though scanty, all of the relevant data suggest that mobile groups in the Eastern Desert and Butana were crossing the Eritrean-Sudanese lowlands in the first half of the 1st millennium AD. Given the traces left by these groups, the hypothesis of a nomadic pastoral exploitation of the area is reasonable. The presence of Post-Meroitic groups in the Jebel Ofreik area and the strong ties between the Khatmiya Group and the Eastern Desert suggest that seasonal movements took place from the Atbara to the Gash Delta, and

from the Kassala region to the Eastern Desert. Seasonal camps with light structures may have been located at the terminal points of these seasonal movements, as suggested by ethnographic evidence from the Hadendowa, who still live in the area (Fattovich *et al.* 1988, 16-18, 21-22). Movements between the northern slopes of the Ethiopian plateau and the Kassala region/Gash Delta may also have occurred: perhaps they were conducted by peoples from the Eastern Desert who were resettled in territories under Aksumite control, as in the case of the Bega of the Ezana's inscription (Zaborski 1967).

Most likely, seasonal movements of these groups overlapped with the movements of trade caravans along the same east-west and north-south tracks. Hypothetical Aksumite interest in the Eritrean-Sudanese lowlands, based on epigraphic evidence, was mainly linked to the strategic location of the lowlands in the regional trade system and to the exploitation of natural resources of the region, such as aromatic resins and ivory (Manzo 1999, 6-8). The Post-Meroitic and Khatmiya groups may have been partners when directly or indirectly involved in the caravan trade, or competitors, when acting as raiders of Aksumite traders along these tracks. The sometimes hostile interaction between Aksumites and Post-Meroitic and Khatmiya groups can probably be inferred in the Aksumite inscriptions mentioning the Noba and the Bega.

When the Post-Meroitic and Khatmiya groups moved through the Eritrean-Sudanese lowlands, a pastoral way of life was not new in that region. A pastoral-oriented strategy was introduced there in the mid-2nd millennium BC by the Jebel Mokram Group, and the later Hagiz Group adopted a subsistence system with a strong pastoral component focussing mainly but not exclusively on the marginal areas (Sadr 1986, 23-24; 1991, 53-63; Fattovich 1990, 21-22, 35; Fattovich *et al.* 1988, 41, 44, 47-48). Nevertheless, with the Post-Meroitic and Khatmiya groups something new happened, the number of sites dramatically decreased compared to the Hagiz Group phase and the ecologically more favourable areas near the Gash River were apparently neglected by settlements. Such changes in land use cannot be explained by environmental reasons but they could possibly be interpreted as a strategy adopted to escape conflict with neighbouring states in central Sudan and the Ethiopian highlands (Fattovich *et al.* 1988, 54; Sadr 1991, 118-119; Manzo 1996, 78). The new strategy was based on the adoption of a very dispersed, mobile and perhaps nomadic way of life. The mobility of these groups in the Eritrean-Sudanese lowlands possibly explains the paucity of the archaeological remains they left and the difficulty in identifying their seasonal camps, as has been noted for more or less contemporary nomadic groups in the Butana (Bradley 1992, 137, 214-215).

It is noteworthy that in the 3rd century AD increasing mobility is a characteristic not only of the people living in eastern Sudan but also of several other groups inhabiting the steppe and desert regions east of the Nile, possibly as a consequence of the wider adoption of the camel. Although present in northeast Africa since the early 1st millennium BC or even earlier (Rowley-Conwy 1988, 246), and in Kushite central Sudan at least in the last centuries BC (Seguenny 1988, 863-864), the camel was used by local people in the Eastern Desert in the 2nd century AD (Desanges 1978, 330, note 130). By the 3rd century the camel may have been widely adopted in the Eastern Desert, perhaps coming via the Red Sea coast, which forced the Roman army to substitute camel-riding troops for their cavalry in the entire region (Updegraff 1988, 89-90). In funerary rituals of the Post-Meroitic aristocracy, the camel was added to the horse as a symbol of military power and triumphal ideology (Lenoble 1994, 119-123), and an inscription of King Ezana dealing with the campaign against the Noba describes two captured Noba aristocrats who were riding camels (Bernand *et al.* 1991, 264, lines 23-24). Although the expansion of nomadic groups and their increasing political and military importance in the whole of northeast Africa in the 3rd century AD may have been a result of the simultaneous weakening of the Kushite kingdom and Roman forces in Egypt (Monneret de Villard 1938b, 23, 40-48; Desanges 1978, 340-353, 364-366; Török 1997b, 475-480; Updegraff 1988, 88-89), the adoption of the camel could have enhanced the role of these groups inhabiting the desert and steppe regions in the regional trade network, as traders and/or raiders (Updegraff 1988, 89-90; Welsby 1996, 204).

At this point several questions arise:

1. Were the contacts between the Eritrean-Sudanese lowlands, Post-Meroitic central Sudan, and the Eastern Desert related to the increasing mobility of some human groups and to the adoption of the camel?

2. Was the disappearance of the Atbai Ceramic Tradition and the Hagiz Group related not only to military and political pressures from powerful neighboring states but also to the success of a new nomadic and pastoral way of life that the adoption of the camel made possible?

3. Was the opening of a network of tracks between Ethiopia and Egypt through the lowlands and the Eastern Desert, as recorded in the *Monumentum Adulitanum*, helped not only by the peace imposed by the Aksumite army but also by the extensive use of camels for trade purposes?

These questions cannot be answered with present data. Clear evidence of the adoption of an adaptive strategy based on the camel, and its impact in the Eritrean-Sudanese lowlands, is still lacking, and only new investigations can possibly enlighten this problem. Nevertheless, some undated tumuli containing camel bones, which are similar to funerary evidence of the Post-Meroitic military aristocracy in the Nile Valley (Lenoble 1994, 119-123), were excavated at Elghena (Conti Rossini 1922, 266-267), near the foothills of the Eritrean plateau. The Elghena camel burials can prob-

ably be ascribed to nomadic pastoral groups moving between the steppes and the edge of the highlands. The mobility of such groups crossing the lowlands would have made Aksumite control of the region very difficult, which might explain the establishment of agreements and alliances with some of these groups, such as the Bega in Ezana's inscription, who were allowed to settle in or at the edge of Aksumite territory with fairly advantageous conditions (Zaborski 1967; Rodinson 1981).

The present evidence suggests that in the first half of the 1st millennium AD the Eritrean-Sudanese lowlands were a sparsely populated region crossed by nomadic groups, with different cultural characteristics that have been observed in the archaeological evidence, a situation also known from the region in more recent times (Fattovich *et al.* 1988). The archaeological evidence seems to suggest that, although the region was sparsely populated during the first half of the 1st millennium AD, the lowlands were not a marginal and insignificant area. On the contrary, the nomadic people who crossed the region were involved in important interactions with other states and groups in northeast Africa.

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