

# SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



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## Contents

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### Kirwan Memorial Lecture

- Bir Nurayet – the Rock Art Gallery of the Red Sea Hills 2  
*Krzysztof Pluskota*
- 

### The Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project

- Excavations in the vicinity of ed-Doma (AKSE), 2005-2006 8  
*Derek A. Welsby*
- Preliminary report on the excavations conducted on Mis Island (AKSC), 2005-2006 13  
*Andrew Ginns*
- The Third Season of the SARS Anglo-German Expedition to the Fourth Cataract of the Nile 20  
*Pavel Wolf and Ulrike Nowotnick*
- Comments on the two Egyptian jars found at Tomb no. 1 of site 3-Q-94 32  
*Robert Schiestl*
- Fourth Nile Cataract petroglyphs in context: the ed-Doma and Dirbi rock-art survey 34  
*Cornelia Kleinitz and Roswitha Koenitz*
- 

### Reports

- Cattle, sherds and mighty walls – the Wadi Howar from Neolithic to Kushite times 43  
*Friederike Jesse*
- Drawings on rocks: the most enduring monuments of Middle Nubia 55  
*David N. Edwards*
- Roman Artillery Balls from Qasr Ibrim, Egypt 64  
*Alan Wilkins, Hans Barnard and Pamela J. Rose*

- Antaios the Giant and Antaios the God, or how could the Greeks have got it so wrong? A statuette in the Nubian Museum: a case of understated syncretism 79  
*Donald M. Bailey*

- Apedemak and Dionysos. Further remarks on the “cult of the grape” in Kush 82  
*Andrea Manzo*

- Bread Moulds and ‘Throne Halls’: Recent Discoveries in the Amun Temple Precinct at Dangeil 95  
*Julie Anderson and Salah Mohamed Ahmed*

- El-Frai: a new Meroitic habitation site in ed-Damer 102  
*Mohamed Faroug Abd el-Rahman*

- Gheresli: a post-Meroitic activity centre in the Blue Nile region 104  
*Mohamed Faroug Abd el-Rahman*

- Paradise Lost: Nubia before the 1964 Exodus 110  
*Herman Bell*
- 

- Miscellaneous 117

- 
- Front cover: Beja man by the well at Bir Vario, Eastern Desert (photo K. Pluskota).



# Gheresli: A post-Meroitic activity centre in the Blue Nile region

Mohamed Farouq Abd el-Rahman

## Introduction

The site at Gheresli has been mentioned in the interim reports of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums - fieldwork section - since 1992, when treasure consisting of some gold objects was found during the digging of a well on one of the farms there. The police and the Antiquities Service were informed when the well-diggers stole the treasure; the case was recorded and investigated by the police from Sennar. Unfortunately, these objects disappeared and none of them was added to the collection of antiquities in the Sudan National Museum (Khider Adam Eisa, pers. comm. 2006);<sup>1</sup> at the same time, no details of the objects or dates were given.

Recently, due to some problems with agricultural expansion in that area, the surveyor Yasin M. Saeed and the writer inspected the site, planned its limits, and followed the official procedures necessary in order to protect and preserve it.

## Historical background

Despite the small amount of archaeological work so far carried out along the Blue Nile, considerable results have been obtained and shed more light upon the distribution of prehistoric sites and Kushite expansion to the south, in addition to discoveries relating to the medieval and Islamic periods.

The most significant archaeological fieldwork on the Blue Nile was carried out at Soba East, which revealed considerable evidence relating to occupation in the medieval period (Welsby and Daniels 1991; Welsby 1998). At the same time, and during the 1990-1998 seasons, the Blue Nile project carried out an extensive survey from the Wadi Soba - el-Hasib area east of Khartoum on the east bank of the Blue Nile as far upstream as Singa. This project focused mainly on prehistoric sites, and few of the historical periods were recorded (Fernández *et al.* 2003, 201).

Further archaeological work was carried out at Amara el-Nasri, a site dated to the prehistoric, Meroitic, post-Meroitic and Christian periods (Abdel Rahman Ali 2003), and at Goz Nasra with remains from the Meroitic to modern periods (Edwards 1991). Work was also conducted in this area during the 1950s (Balfour Paul 1952).

The most southerly occurrence of Kushite material on

the Blue Nile was found at Rossieres during the construction of the dam (Welsby 1996, 58). Other remains were found at Abu Geili (Crawford and Addison 1951). The nearest evidence of a Kushite presence to Gheresli came from a Meroitic cemetery at Sennar (Makwar) (Dixon 1963), as well as from Meroitic and post-Meroitic cemeteries at Karim's Garden south of Sennar (Edwards 1991).

## Site location

The site is located about 22km north of the modern city of Sennar, on the right bank of the Blue Nile (Figure 1). As a result of surface collection, the site can be divided into three localities:

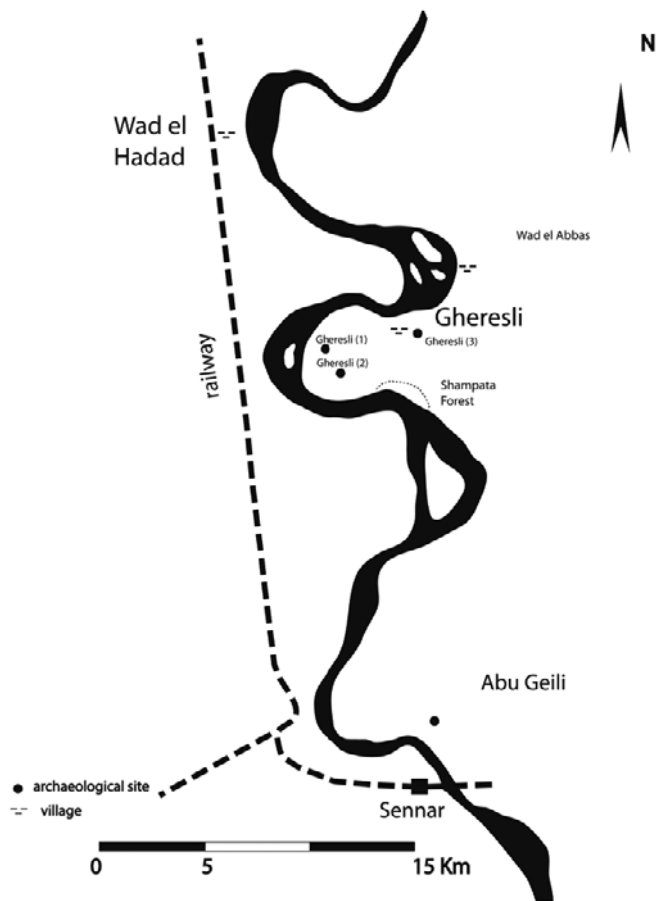


Figure 1. Location of the sites at Gheresli.

### Gheresli 1

N. 13° 44.189' E. 33° 35.180'

This is the area where the treasure was found on one of the farms of the local people. The site is located 1km east of the Blue Nile and measures 7 *feddan* (2.94 ha) in area. There was no archaeological material visible on the surface, but it is possible that the area had been used as a cemetery in the past. Further investigation will allow a better understanding of the site and prove or reject what we have been told by local informants, or what has been assumed on the basis of knowledge from other sites.

<sup>1</sup> Deputy Director for Scientific Affairs at the Antiquities Service in 1987-88.

*Gheresli 2*

N. 13° 43.425' E. 33° 35.568'

Situated 1.5km south east of Gheresli 1 and about 2km east of the Blue Nile, here there is abundant archaeological material scattered on the surface, indicating that this was a centre of human activity (Colour plate XLVI) (see below).

*Gheresli 3*

N. 13° 44.477' E. 33° 37. 511'

It is situated about 300m south east of the village of Gheresli, and covers an area of 3 *feddān* (1.26 ha). A few eroded and coarse pottery sherds were scattered on the surface. Unfortunately, there was no more archaeological material to assist with dating the site.

**Topography**

The topography of the Gheresli area mainly consisted of black soil, alluvial sand and kanker deposits. Due to the heavy rainy season, many valleys cross the area leaving mounds in between, with eroded surfaces.<sup>2</sup> The vegetation is concentrated near the river, where some forests of acacia trees are protected by the government.

Gheresli 2 is a mound surrounded by a valley on the south and eastern side, and by cultivation on the other sides. The site enjoys extensive views over a wide area, which is perhaps why it was chosen for settlement.

**Methodology**

The archaeological work was concentrated mainly in Gheresli 2, which covers an area of about 43 *feddān* (18.06 ha.), where a concrete bench mark provides an elevation of 421m OSD at the highest point in the middle of the mound. A grid system of 100 × 100m squares was laid out to cover the site, and numbers and letters were given for the subdivision squares. The test pits were dug according to the grid to check on the southern limit of the site, and to examine

some archaeological features which appeared on the surface.

**Site survey**

Archaeologically, it was clear from the quantity of surface finds that this site is richer than the others. The archaeological material included pottery sherds, red-brick fragments, lithics and ostrich eggshell beads.

**Pottery**

The pottery sherds (Plate 1) shed some light on the characteristics of the post-Meroitic material culture on the Blue



Plate 1. Gheresli 2, pottery sherds from the surface collection.

Nile. The assemblage largely consisted of rims which were collected from the surface along two north-south transects made through the site. These sherds (Figure 2) were studied and can be classified as follows:

Almost all collected sherds were decorated with either incisions or impressions below the rim, these could be divided into:

Horizontal and diagonal impressed rocker decoration (GRS 001 and 002).

Vertical impressed dotted lines (GRS 003 and 004)

Groups of diagonally impressed dotted-wavy lines (GRS 005).

Combination of three incised lines below the rim and incised geometric decoration (GRS 006).

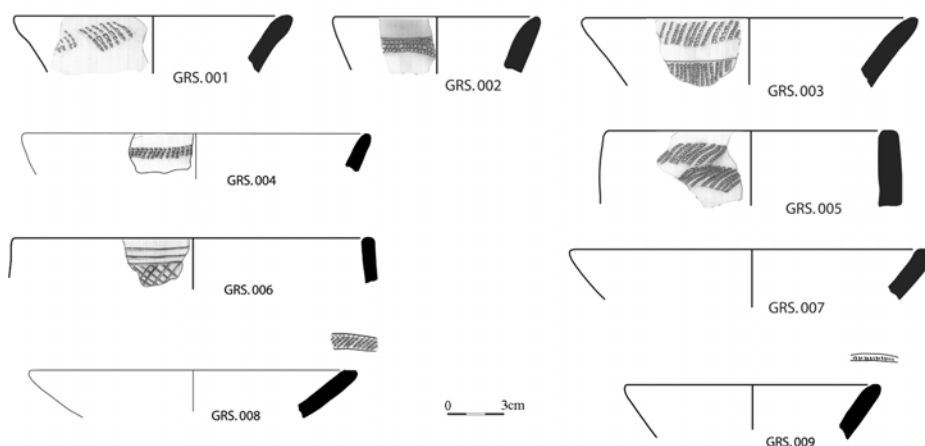


Figure 2. Pottery from the surface collection at Gheresli (scale 1:4).

*Rim types* Very simple plain rim forms can be recognized, such as bevelled rim (GRS 007, 008 and 011), rounded rim

<sup>2</sup> This has been confirmed during the excavations at site 2.



(GRS 004, 009, 002, 003 and 012) and squared rim (GRS 006 and 005). Some of these are similar to the vessel rim types from Qoz Nasra and Karims Garden (Edwards 1991).

The characteristic features of some of these pottery sherds can be paralleled with pottery vessels found during the excavations in both test pits from the southern part of the site (see below).

*Colour and surface treatment* The external and internal slipped surfaces of several sherds (GRS 008, 007, 009 and 002) were brown and dark brown, while two sherds (GRS 003 and 005) were burnished and slipped externally; one sherd (GRS 006) was plain.

#### *Stone implements*

A number of stone implements were collected along the north-south transects. These consisted of some milky-quartz flakes, fragments of grindstones and archer's looses (Colour plate XLVII).

#### Gheresli 2: square 20.A.1 (Grave No. 1)

The 4m square excavation trench was placed so as to include the red-brick feature. From the surface clearance 200mm in depth, it was clear that the red bricks were accumulated irregularly in an oval shaft measuring 1 × 0.6m in diameter (Plate 2). After removing the red-brick fragments, measuring 280+ × 170 × 80mm,<sup>3</sup> and due to the difficulty



Plate 2. Gheresli 2. Red-brick fragments within the shaft in Grave No. 1.

of recognizing the differences between the cuts and the filling, a trench of 2 × 2m was excavated carefully to a depth of 250mm, where pottery vessels appeared immediately east and about 320mm below the surface. The roof of the burial was removed giving access to a contracted north west-south east burial of a child laying on its right side, head to the north west facing south (Colour plate XLVIII, Figure 3). The grave goods were deposited in front of the deceased in a north-south row, and consisted of a large and small bowl plus an inverted beer jar and bowl in the middle. Some finger bones were found inside bowl No. GRS 013; these have been studied and identified by Dr Brenda Baker<sup>4</sup> as those of an adolescent, which might indicate that the bowl was placed upside down over the left hand of the deceased.

The grave goods (Plate 3, Figure 4) consisted of the following:

Bowl No. GRS 010: a small coarse brown cup.

Bowl No. GRS 011: a burnished black-brown bowl with incised 'zig-zag' decoration on the rim. A similar vessel was found at Goz Nasra and dated to the post-Meroitic period (Edwards 1991, 49, pl. IX. no. QM0021).

Jar No. GRS 012: a burnished brown short-neck jar, decorated with three groups of two lines of red-filled rocker impressions.

Bowl No. GRS 013: a carinated bowl with highly-polished black slip, decorated with an incised vertical graffito.

The grave has been reconstructed according to the archaeological evidence and the observations made during the excavation. It consisted of an oval shaft 1 × 0.65m dug to a depth of 300mm below the surface, where a shallow oval burial chamber was cut into hard alluvial sandy soil on the east side at the bottom of the shaft, measuring 1 × 1.1m

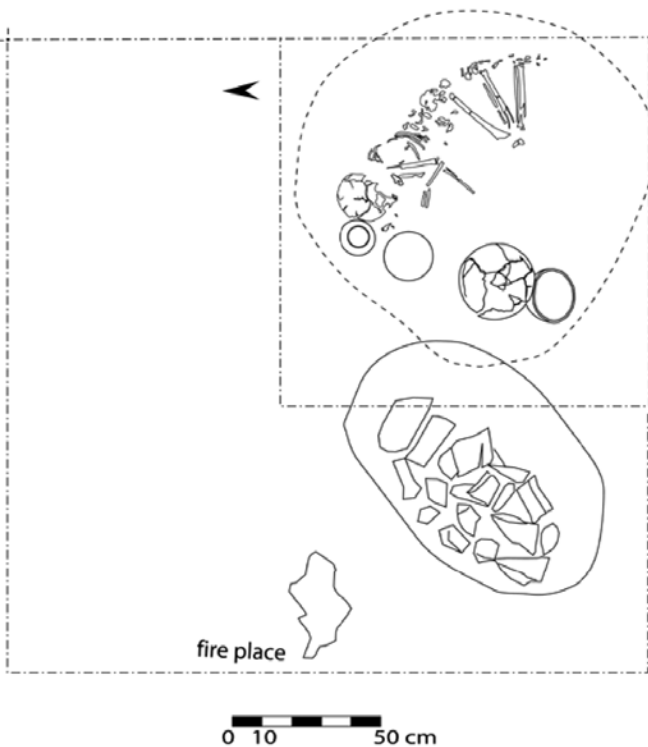


Figure 3. Top plan of Grave No. 1, with the fireplace and the bowl to the south west.

<sup>3</sup> There was no complete red brick surviving to allow measurement of the length.

<sup>4</sup> Dr Brenda J. Baker, associate professor – College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Department of Anthropology, Arizona State University.

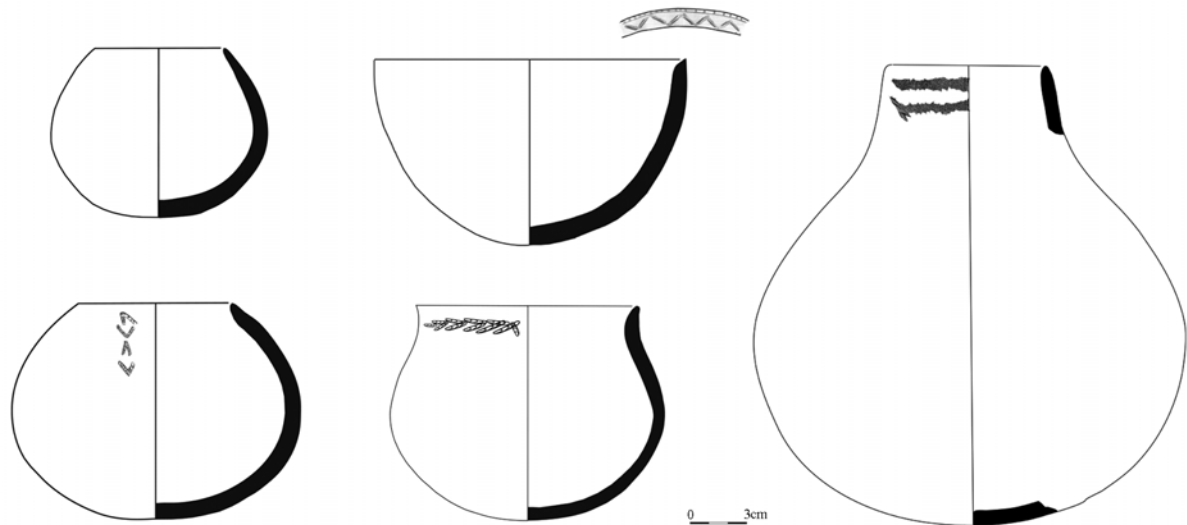


Figure 4. The pottery grave goods from Grave 1 (scale 1:4).



Plate 3. Pottery vessels in Grave No. 1, and the bowl from the south west side.

in size. After the burial ceremonies,<sup>5</sup> the shaft had been refilled with fragments of red bricks; these fragments may indicate that there is an ancient monument in the vicinity.

Another bowl (GRS 014) appeared at about 200mm below the surface; it was buried about 3.5m south west of the shaft of the burial, but it has no relation with the grave. The bowl is brown slipped with incised irregular crossed lines forming four horizontal bands below the rim.

#### Gheresli 2, Square 20. P.1. (Graves Nos 2 and 3)

Archaeologically, besides checking the limit of this area, the presence of bones and disturbed red-brick fragments prompted further investigation.

In the south-eastern part of the square, two skeletons of infants appeared 100-200mm below the surface (Grave No.

2). The later semi-contracted skeleton was laid on the other; both of them were lying on their right side and oriented east-west, heads to the west facing north (Plate 4, Figure 5). A few ostrich eggshell beads were collected from the skeletons.

It was very clear that the ground surface at this point is much eroded. On the other hand, the shallowness of the grave might indicate an early dating for the deceased, as

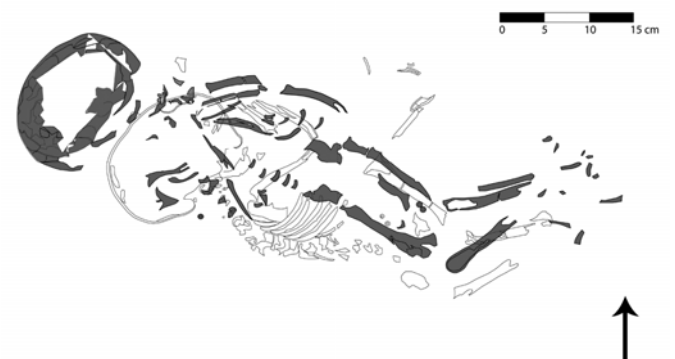


Figure 5. Grave No. 2. Top plan showing the double burial at Gheresli (scale 1:10).



Plate 4. Two infants from Grave No. 2.

<sup>5</sup> It is probable that the fireplace which is located north of the shaft was used during the burial ceremony.



well as the continuation of human activity, and the practice of having child burials together with occupation, in that region.

For testing the feature with the red-brick fragments, a pit 1m square was excavated in the centre of the main square. The soil levels (the filling) could not be differentiated from the natural except for the black soil to the west. The red-brick fragments stopped at a depth of 200mm. An infant skull appeared at a depth of 550mm and was followed by two more infant skeletons accompanied by grave goods



Plate 5. Grave No 3. Three infants accompanied by grave goods.

(Grave No. 3). The grave was intact, but due to the reopening of the grave, the ingress of water and the collapse of the roof, the deceased were disturbed and comingled (Plate 5). However, all the deceased were oriented approximately north-south.

**Skeleton 1:** lying on its left side, head to the north. Near the left arm, white and red quartz beads and red glass were

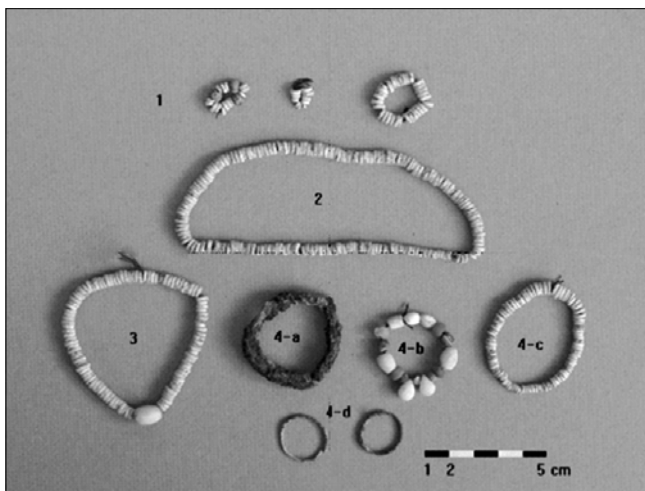


Plate 6. Personal ornaments from Grave No. 3.

collected. The deceased wore two iron and bead bracelets on the right arm. Two copper rings were deposited in the same place and may have belonged to the same individual (Plate 6-4a, b, c and d).

**Skeleton 2** was lying on skeleton no. 1. It was placed on its left side, head to the north. The scattered ostrich eggshell beads near the pelvis presumably came from a belt, and some more beads were scattered near the arms (Plate 6, 1 and 2).

**Skeleton 3:** in contrast to the other bodies, this individual was lying on its right side, head to the south, facing east. Some ostrich eggshell beads and one piece of quartz were found near the neck, indicating the presence of a necklace (Plate 6-3).

### Grave goods

The ceramic grave goods consisted of two vessels (Figure 6) deposited towards the west of the burials:

Small jar No. GRS 015, with a burnished grey-brown slip, decorated with vertical incised short lines on the rim and three groups of two curved impressed lines on the exterior surface.

Small cup No. GRS 016, with a burnished grey-brown slip, decorated with two incised wavy lines and diagonal red-filled rocker impression, and four groups of double holes below the rim which is decorated with incised short lines.

From the relative stratigraphy of the archaeological con-

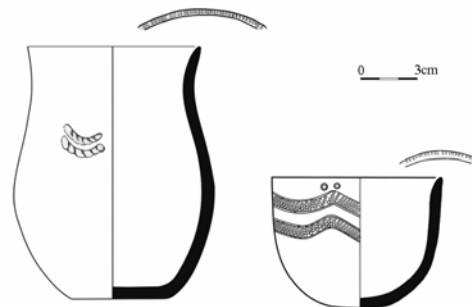


Figure 6. The pottery grave goods from Grave 3 (scale 1:4).

tents of the grave, it seems that the grave goods (pottery vessels) were deposited at one time, but later than the deceased No. 1, which led us to assume that the grave had been opened carefully for the other two bodies.

### Conclusion

Considerable archaeological results were obtained during the survey and these, combined with the archaeological material from the graves, particularly the pottery vessels, allow



the site to be dated to the post-Meroitic period. The form of the contracted north-south burials is certainly standard practice during the post-Meroitic period in what had been the southern provinces of the Kushite realm (Lenoble 1987, 98-99). Gheresli is a promising site which may shed more light on this period along the Blue Nile, where the archaeological finds indicate the presence of a cemetery (probably for children).

The red-brick fragments from the site indicate the possibility of the location of a building near Gheresli, most probably earlier in date than the post-Meroitic period, which encourages further investigation.

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*Colour plate XLVI. Gheresli 2. General view looking towards the west.*



*Colour plate XLVII. Gheresli 2. Some of the stone implements from the surface collection.*



*Colour plate XLVIII. Gheresli 2. Grave No. 1. Burial and the grave goods.*