

SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Bulletin No. 15 2011





The map reflects the new territorial situation following the independence of South Sudan in July 2011.

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Reports

Neolithic beakers from North-Eastern Africa

Anna Longa

At the turn of the Vth and IVth millennia BC a new fashion for the production and use of a characteristic group of vessels spread over the vast area of north-eastern Africa. The vessels were caliciform beakers (Figure 1). They have convex bases and flared rims, although a few examples with flat bottoms were also registered. Their surface is usually richly decorated with geometric designs that were either incised or impressed. The vessels were distinguished for the first time in burials of the Egyptian Tasa culture. Numerous publications label the vessels with diverse names such as caliciform beakers, tulip beakers or Tasian beakers (Brunton 1937; Ciałowicz 1999, 103; Gatto 2006, 104). The majority of them were discovered in cemeteries, where they had been offered to the deceased

and deposited by the head or pelvis of their owners (Reinold 2001, 8; Welsby 2001, 571; Salvatori and Usai 2002). A smaller amount of these objects was found within settlements (Gatto 2006). The geographic range of caliciform beakers in the Nile Valley is most probably limited from northern Egypt to Khartoum. Some examples are known from Wadi Atulla in the Eastern Desert and from the Western Desert, where they were discovered at numerous sites between the Dakhla Oasis and Wadi Howar. Below an attempt will be made ascertain their topographical range and chronological position.

Caliciform beakers are one of the characteristic pottery groups for the Tasa culture. This cultural unit is the predecessor of the Badari culture and was distinguished on the basis of discoveries made in Deir Tasa (Brunton 1937). The Tasa culture was developing in the last quarter of the Vth millennium BC, and its beginnings are presently seen slightly before the emergence of the Badari culture in Upper Egypt, to which the former is later contemporary (Kaiser 1985; Hendrickx 2006, 57-58). It is difficult to explicitly define the settlement area of the unit, most probably it is in the North-Upper Egyptian region, in the Nile Valley reaching Armant. The Tasian people were nomads living in the Eastern Desert, while they used the edge of the Nile Valley for their cemeteries. Settle-

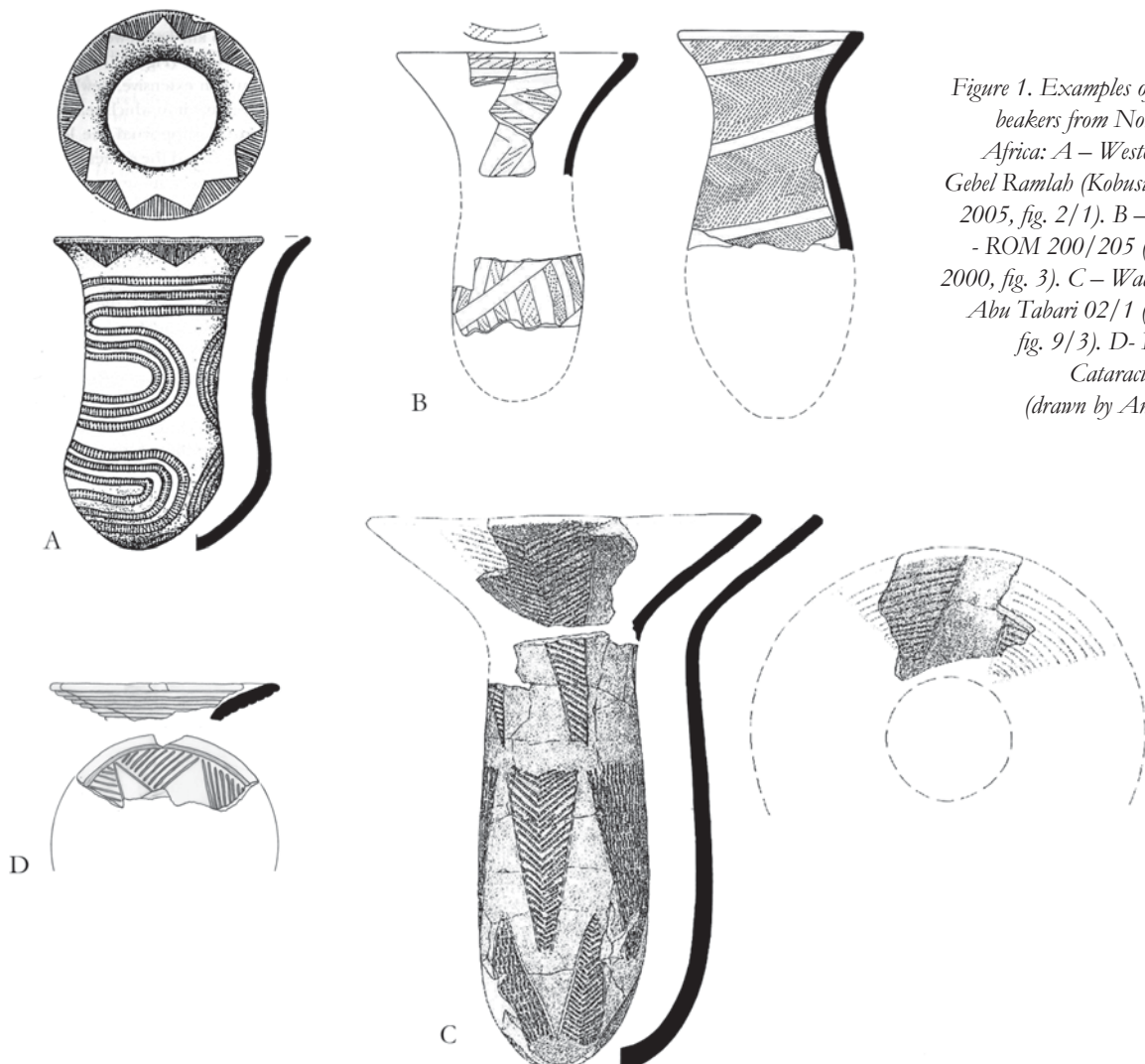


Figure 1. Examples of caliciform beakers from North-Eastern Africa: A – Western Desert - Gebel Ramlah (Kobusiewicz et al. 2005, fig. 2/1). B – Letti Basin - ROM 200/205 (Chłodnicki 2000, fig. 3). C – Wadi Howar – Abu Tabari 02/1 (Jesse 2008, fig. 9/3). D – Fourth Nile Cataract - el-Ar P1 (drawn by Anna Longa).



ments were possibly located in the desert. The Tasa culture should be presently understood as a kind of desert cultural phenomenon and its people had numerous relations with the inhabitants of the Nile Valley (Ciałowicz 1999, 46-47, 103; Friedman and Hobbs 2002).

Caliciform beakers were mainly discovered in burials of the Tasa culture, but they are attested also in settlements. From the technological point of view, the vessels are usually of fine quality, they have flared rims and most often convex bases. The surface of the beakers is usually smoothed and decorated with geometric, incised designs. Examples of caliciform beakers are known also from Badarian sites in Upper Egypt (Gatto 2006, 104).

Discoveries from the Eastern Desert in Wadi Atulla, dated for 4940-4455 cal. BC are also being associated with the Tasa cultural context (Friedman and Hobbs 2002, 178). These vessels are small with slightly flared rims, their bases are rounded. Their surface is covered with impressed and incised geometric decoration (Gatto 2006, 104-105).

In Lower Nubia two completely preserved caliciform beakers were found in a C-Group burial from Cemetery 118 in the Dakka-Sayala area (Firth 1915, pl. 27f; 1927, pl. 25a3), but it is unquestionable that they were secondarily deposited there. Two further examples were distinguished by Maria Gatto (2006, 105) from the collection of pottery fragments of the Abka culture, at site SJE 365. These fragments have incised geometric decoration. The results of research done in the Nile Valley enable us to date the Abka culture to the period 5350-3630 cal. BC. The oldest dates for the late phase of the unit correspond to those obtained from Kadruka 13 and 21 and Site R12 in Upper Nubia (Salvatori and Usai 2006-2007, 325-326; 2008).

In Upper Nubia caliciform beakers were registered at a few Neolithic sites. From the area between the Second and Third Cataracts, they are known from e.g. Sedeinga (Reinold 1994a) and from the area between the Third and Fourth Cataracts examples are far more frequent (Reinold 1994b; 2001; Welsby 2000; 2001, 571; Chłodnicki 2000; Salvatori and Usai 2001; 2006; Geus and Lecoite 2003). The oldest vessels were recorded in Neolithic cemeteries in Kadruka and Site R12, where the pottery had been deposited as funeral offerings (Welsby 1997; Reinold 2001; Salvatori and Usai 2006; 2008). Radiocarbon dates from the aforementioned sites enable us to connect the oldest caliciform beakers to the first half of the Vth millennium BC. The majority of vessels from the region is represented by small beakers with smoothed surfaces decorated with impressed and incised designs. Tall vessels with widely flared rims are also known (Gatto 2006, 104).

Recently extensive research in the area of the Fourth Nile Cataract, apart from numerous important discoveries, brought to light further examples of caliciform beakers that enlarged significantly their range. Such vessels were found on two sites in the central Amri-Kirbekan area. The first example comes from the Grave 174 discovered in the cemetery on Umm Melyakta Island (Fuller 2004, 7-8; Edwards and Fuller

2005, 24). Five fragments of beakers have been also found in the vicinity of et-Tereif on site 3-O-3. The site was in use in the Early and Late Neolithic periods (Braddock 2003, 52; Welsby 2003, 20; 2010, 182; Osypiński 2010). Fragments of three other items (large rim sherds), which were decorated with geometric patterns, were registered in the cemetery el-Ar P1 (Figure 1.D). This necropolis was in use in the Kerma Moyen and Late Meroitic periods. On the surface there was also Neolithic pottery and it is difficult to state whether the material is connected to the cemetery or a settlement as all earlier strata or structures had been destroyed by later users of the land (Longa 2009).

In the Khartoum region Neolithic people started to use caliciform beakers in the IVth millennium BC. This kind of vessel became one of the typical burial offerings of the period. The oldest are three examples discovered in Kadero (Chłodnicki 1987). The beakers have brown, smoothed surfaces and rich, geometric, incised and impressed decoration. During the Khartoum Late Neolithic phase beakers became slender with widely flared rims. They were deposited as funeral offerings in the cemeteries in el-Kadada and Geili (Geus 1984; Caneva 1988; Gatto 2006, 105).

Caliciform beakers were attested also at a few sites in the Western Desert. Their presence is proved in the cemeteries at Gebel Ramlah dated to the Final Neolithic. The phase falls in the Vth millennium BC and is called *Bunat el-Ansam* (Megalith Builder) (Wendorf and Schild 2001; Schild *et al.* 2002; Kobusiewicz *et al.* 2004).¹ Three cemeteries at Gebel Ramlah (E-01-2, E-03-1 and E-03-2) were most probably used by three distant families settled by the lake that formerly existed at this place. In the group of objects which were offered to the deceased, there were five caliciform beakers preserved completely or only partially. Vessels from Gebel Ramlah are richly decorated with geometric patterns and one of the beakers has snake-shaped patterns with impressed hollows (Kobusiewicz *et al.* 2009, 148-150).

In the Western Desert, the presence of identical or similar vessels, although the latter are without certain chronological context, is proved also along the ancient trade route from the Thebes to Abydos in Wadi el-Hôl, in the Yabsa pass and by the oases in Kharga and Dakhla (Darnell 2002; Hope 2002; Gatto 2006, 104). Further south such objects were discovered at the site of Abu Tabari 02/1 in the lower Wadi Howar. Radiocarbon dates enable us to estimate the settlement use to the period around 3800 cal. BC. Seven beakers were registered there; among them one was almost complete (Jesse 2008, 58-59, fig. 9.3).

When discussing these pottery types, one should also describe an amulet from site E-75-8 in Nabta Playa. The object is a miniature beaker with two holes for hanging and

¹ Dates for the cemeteries are: E-01-2 5740±50 BP - 4630 cal. BC, 5610±45 - 4360 cal. BC, 5555±60 BP - 4340 cal. BC, from the cemetery E-03-1 comes the date: 5535±35 BP - 4310 cal. BC (Kobusiewicz *et al.* 2009, 148)

was found by the deceased's chest in a grave dated to the Final Neolithic (Wendorf and Schild 1980; Kobusiewicz *et al.* 2009, 151).

Another highly significant discovery made in the Fourth Cataract area are representations of caliciform beakers in rock art. Close to the village of Hagar el-Beida at the site called by the locals Jebel Kitaba, two large blocks with representations of three beakers were found. The engravings were made on smooth, horizontal surfaces by careless pecking. One of the blocks represents two beakers in different orientations, while to one side on another block a single beaker was depicted (Figure 2, Plates 1 and 2). Unfortunately, the chronological position of the engravings is difficult to assess.

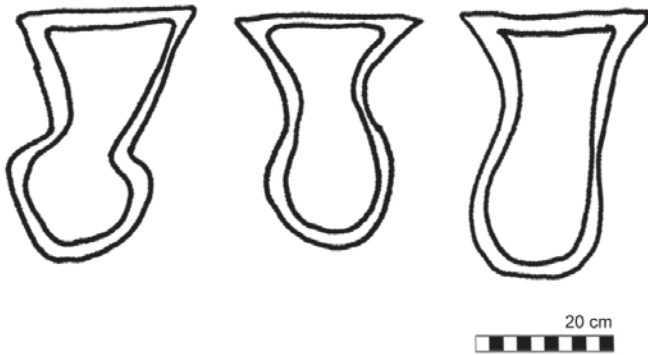


Figure 2. Representations of caliciform beakers from Jebel Kitaba (drawn by Anna Longa).

It seems that caliciform beakers were developed in Upper Nubia, since it was there that what are presently regarded as the oldest vessels were discovered. Slightly later such beakers appeared also in the Western and Eastern Deserts and at the Tasa culture sites. Finally, they arrived into the Khartoum area and to Wadi Howar. The knowledge of production of these vessels was spreading from Upper Nubia first north and north east and finally south.

Caliciform beakers are present in the vast areas of North-Eastern Africa in numerous variations from small vessels to tall and slender with widely flared rims. These differences can be interpreted as local variants. Also their surface decoration is diversified. The heterogeneity of applied decorative motives most probably originated from the individual style of particular potters (Gatto 2006, 104).



Plate 1. Representations of two caliciform beakers from Jebel Kitaba (photo - Ewa Kuciewicz).

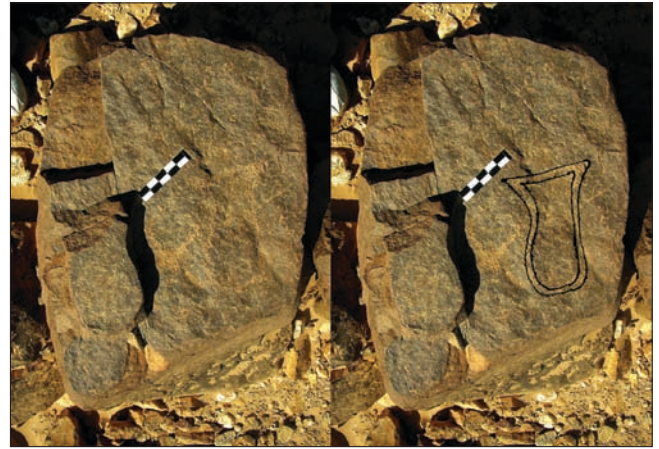


Plate 2. Representations of caliciform beaker from Jebel Kitaba (photo - Ewa Kuciewicz).

Another feature of the vessels is their role as burial offerings. The great majority of the objects come from Neolithic cemeteries. They comprise an interesting and original group of goods deposited in richly equipped, mostly male burials probably functioning to highlight the social status of the deceased. They were presumably used during funeral ceremonies such as libations as has been proposed by numerous authors (Welsby 2001, 571; Gatto 2006, 104-106; Jesse 2008, 59; Kobusiewicz *et al.* 2009, 150). Therefore, it may be accepted that these vessels were of ritual importance. Such an interpretation is emphasized by the representation of a beaker in the form of an amulet and depositing it by the deceased. Depictions of beakers on rocks at Jebel Kitaba could also have a ritual character as they could be connected to magic and/or funeral ceremonies. The engravings were made on flat and large blocks so it is possible they could have been altars for libations.

The ritual function of the beakers was spreading in the Vth and IVth millennia BC together with the knowledge of their production. It is worthwhile to ponder over the ways the information of the cult importance of the caliciform beakers reached inhabitants over such a vast territory. The inhabitants of North-Eastern Africa could have communicated in a language precise enough to verbalize basic abstract terms.

That the Neolithic inhabitants of North-Eastern Africa

were in contact is signified by numerous imported raw materials, which enable us to ascertain directions of the exchange. Various sites in central Sudan, Lower Nubia and the Western Desert have yielded Red Sea shells (Krzyżaniak 1991; Kobusiewicz *et al.* 2004). Stone raw materials were popularly exchanged. Materials from Rabak and Kadero were imported from the Sixth Cataract area, the Red Sea Hills



and central Sahara (Haaland 1989; Krzyżaniak 1991). Turquoise from the Sinai is known from sites in Nabta Playa (Wendorf *et al.* 1997, 94). Similarly, ivory found in sites in the Western Desert had been imported from the south (Kobusiewicz *et al.* 2004). The scale of exchange is also proved by Egyptian discoveries of obsidian originated probably from Ethiopia (Ciałowicz 1999, 136). Contacts among African Neolithic groups were the result of the constant migration of pastoral people with a nomadic way of life. Thus the shepherds travelling with their herds contributed to the spread of valuable materials and transfer of cultural patterns and ideas (Caneva 1991, 13).

The range of caliciform beakers is further proof for increased contacts among peoples of this part of Africa. In this case, however, simple knowledge of how to shape a vessel was followed by the information relating to its purpose. It suggests that at least some rituals practiced over the vast area were similar if not the same. The presence of caliciform beakers in cemeteries but also in settlements may suggest that we deal here with rites which were taking place in both spheres of human activity. Most probably libations accompanied numerous ceremonies starting from the birth of a child, through its initiation into successive phases of life, until the burial. It should be considered possible that the repertoire of events graced with libations was far wider. The caliciform beaker understood in this way must have connected the spheres of *sacrum* and *profanum*.

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