

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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The Kushite Pottery Sequence at Kawa: Parallels at Home and Abroad

Isabella Welsby Sjöström and Ross Thomas

The ceramic assemblage from the Kushite period at Kawa is extremely plentiful; to date more than 2,000 different forms have been drawn, while thousands of sherds have been ‘processed’: weighed, counted, their fabrics and forms recorded, and decoration and surface treatment catalogued. While the majority are coarse ware forms, almost certainly locally made, there is also a proportionally small number of distinctive imports, such as marl ware amphorae from Egypt and the Levant during the Napatan period, and an increasingly international variety during the late Napatan and Meroitic period.

The principal areas that are being considered here consist of the ancillary building and its two predecessors (A2-4) near a small shrine (A1) at the south end of the site, a ‘magazine’ or store building (F1) on the flat ground to the north, two kilns, and levels beneath and contemporary with the temenos gateway (TG5), as well as pottery from various burials within the cemetery, site R18. Pottery from the late Napatan period in Area B also matches that in levels in (TG5).

It should be stressed that the pottery illustrated in this preliminary article only represents a fraction of the forms recovered, and the apparent absence here of a form should not be taken to mean that it does not occur at Kawa.

The Napatan (Early Kushite) levels

Quantities of seal impressions have been found both in association with the shrine (Building A1) and the magazine (Building F1). While the majority of these are not datable, some from Building A1 date to the reigns of Anlamani (623-593 BC) and Aspelta (593-568 BC) (I. Vincentelli, pers. comm.). Together with an altar within that building dedicated to Taharqo (690-664 BC) they indicate that Buildings A4 and A3, both earlier than Building A2, which in turn is contemporary with Building A1, must predate this period. They probably span the 8th and extend back into the 9th centuries BC. The pottery forms from these buildings for which there are datable parallels elsewhere fit with this dating. It is possible that the earliest levels excavated below Building A3 may be even earlier than the 9th century BC, but unfortunately neither the pottery nor the other finds include anything that is diagnostic of an earlier date. No New Kingdom forms could be identified. Elsewhere (at Amara West, for example) red-rimmed dishes are predominantly wheel-made in the New Kingdom period; the apparent lack of wheel-made wares in the earliest Napatan levels at Kawa is noteworthy, but needs further investigation before any conclusions can be drawn. It should be borne in mind that the area under excavation becomes

progressively smaller the deeper the trench, with an obvious effect on the size of the assemblages recovered, and also the different uses of the buildings excavated could be expected to have implications for the type of forms encountered. Nevertheless, comparison of contemporary levels from a number of different trenches across the site reveals a largely homogenous assemblage.

Looking at the pottery in stratigraphic terms, it becomes clear that certain forms are characteristic in certain periods, while others remain a constant feature over a very long time. Figure 1 illustrates the typical forms from contexts relating to the stratigraphic sequence of buildings within Area A. Common to the pre-Building A2 levels are red-rimmed handmade bowls and dishes; with the earliest levels in Building A2 there is a marked change, with a proliferation of forms and an increasing predominance of wheel-made vessels. What brings about the change is an interesting question *per se*; the answer is probably a combination of the local introduction of the potter’s wheel on a wide(r) scale and greater prosperity at Kawa (coinciding with the reign of Taharqo).

The coarse wares – there are very few forms that could be described as fine wares throughout the Napatan period – range from flat bread moulds to cooking pots, basins, beakers and dishes, as well as the ubiquitous handmade, red-rimmed bowls and cups, particularly common in the earlier levels.

Towards the Mid (7th-5th century BC) and Late Napatan (4th century BC) period these become less frequent and wheel-made forms become more common. Distinctive but less common forms include incense burners and sub-oval basins with appliqué animals on the rim (see below).

Apart from the red-rimmed ware, a coarser type of cooking pot is also a common feature in the assemblages; these vessels are however rarely blackened from cooking fires. The rims have been smoothed both on the interior and exterior, perhaps with a rag, while the rest of the surfaces are rough, and in some instances bear the marks of impressed fish spines. As the effect is not easy to see, it is unlikely that it was done for decorative purposes, but possibly in order to enhance the cooking properties of the vessels in some way.

Probably the most distinctive indicator types of pottery in Napatan contexts are the amphorae with rilled rims (Figure 1, no. 21). These jars or amphorae, bag shaped with ribbing over the main part of the body and two small handles, begin to appear in the 8th century BC, at first made in an Egyptian marl fabric but progressively over time becoming more common in Nile silt fabrics, or combination fabrics of the two (marl clay and Nile clay). Whether the vessels made of Nile silt are locally made rather than imported from Egypt is uncertain at this stage of our research.

Other imports include Phoenician amphorae, of which there are a number of variants (Figure 2). This category is not represented in great quantity, but stands out within the assemblage thanks to its distinctive fabric and form, which make even small body sherds easy to identify. These vessels vary an amount in form, but most of the sherds found at

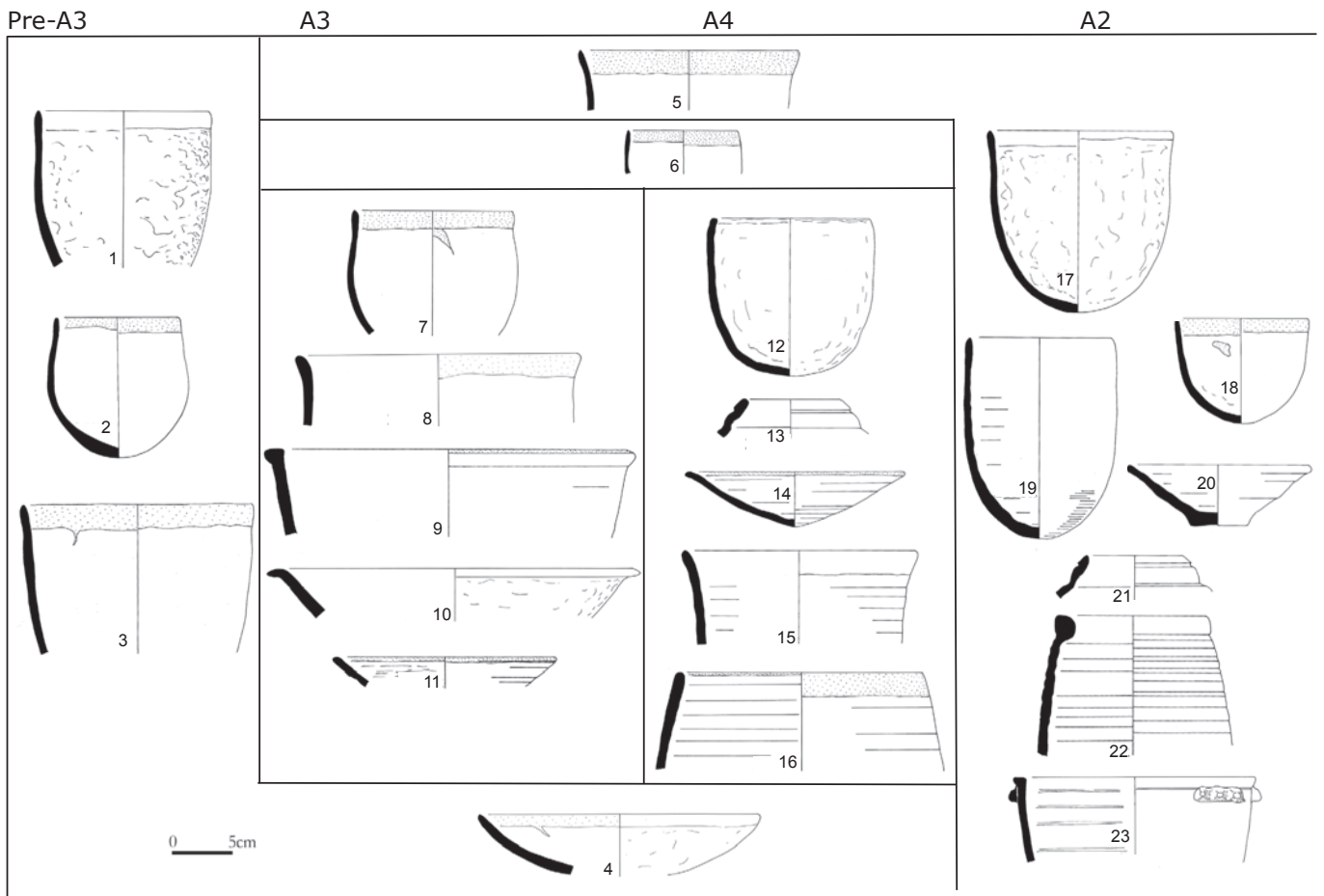


Figure 1. Common forms from the Pre-Building A3, Buildings A3 and A4 and early Building A2 levels in Area A.

Kawa in the Phoenician fabric are body sherds, and only a relative small number of forms have been identified to date. Two of the forms illustrated in Figure 2 are composites, but are comparable to forms known from other sites. Thin section analysis suggests these are from the Lebanese coast, with close similarities in fabric to those produced at Serepta (port city of Southern Lebanon) with its coralline algae and foraminifera species (Marl fabric 1A, Bettles 2003).

The early pottery from Building A3 and pre-A3 deposits appears to be contemporary with the Napatan levels in Area F (cut by the later Meroitic kilns) and the levels within the magazine; some vessel forms are actually identical. The handmade bowls and other forms from the pre-A3 levels (cf. Figure 1) are also very similar to those of the lowest levels in trench TG5, which predate the surfaces within the gate, or possibly the Napatan period gate itself. Bowls of this type are ubiquitous in the early Napatan period, as witnessed at, for example, Sanam (Griffiths 1923; Lohwasser 2010, 82, col. pl. 19) and Jebel Barkal (cf. MFA online catalogue, accession no. 20.4506, <http://www.mfa.org/search/collections?keyword=20.4506>).

The range of Napatan forms becomes considerably more varied by the 7th/ 6th century and onwards. The forms within the midden in trench TG5 (the temenos gate) are an interesting assemblage, partly because it contains some forms not previously well-represented in contemporary

areas elsewhere on the site, but also because forms of 6th (or possibly 7th) century date are present (cf. Figures 3.1 and 3.2 with Ruffieux 2007, 223, pl. 1.1, fig. 2). Other forms may not be as early, but the assemblage still awaits detailed study. This suggests that the stone pavement in the gate was covered by sand early on, and that the overall ground level had risen to such an extent that at the time of the vaulted clean-up operation led by King Irike-Amannotte in c. 430 BC no attempt was made to clean down to the stone pavement, the memory of whose existence probably had already been lost. The range of forms within the gate still needs to be studied in detail, but illustrated here (Figures 3.1-4 and 3.5-6, from elsewhere on site) are some of the forms more easily datable, through parallels published elsewhere (Nuri, Dunham 1955; Kerma, Mohamed Ahmed 1992, *passim* and Ruffieux 2007).

Among the overwhelmingly practical forms favoured by the early Kushites is a range of vessels decorated with animals, applied to the rims of what predominantly were oval basins of varying size and uncertain function, possibly ritual. Most frequently these survive in very fragmentary form, either part of the profile or the animal being recovered, but in one notable instance we have a nearly complete vessel, albeit found in two halves, respectively from within the shrine (Building A1) and the wind-blown sand near Building A2. An interesting

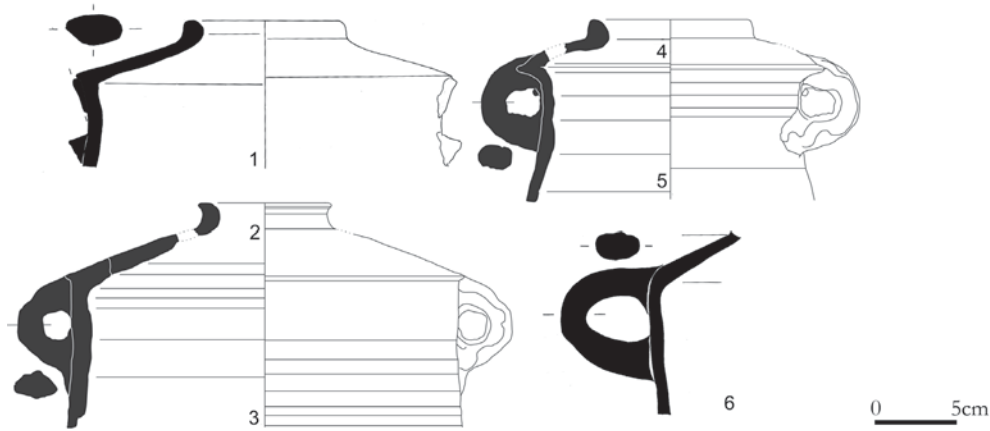


Figure 2. Phoenician amphorae forms, scale 1:4.

parallel to the crocodile pot is a similar vessel from Nuri (Nu. 32, Queen Akhrasan, 463-435 BC) (Plate 1; Dunham 1955, pl LXXXIV.E, row 2; cf. also MFA online catalogue, accession no. 20.4778); it should be noted that the crocodiles on the vessel from Nuri are not recognised as such in the online description, although with the help of the similar vessels at Kawa, that is clearly what is depicted.

The principal trends from the early Kushite Napatan levels that emerge are:

- (1) The earliest levels have the least amount of wheel-made pottery.
- (2) Red-rimmed bowls, cups and dishes account for the majority of the earliest assemblages, and while these continue to occur in later levels, they are joined by many other forms.
- (3) While some handmade forms occur into the Meroitic phase, the most common forms are preponderantly wheel-made by the 7th and 6th centuries BC.
- (4) Napatan amphorae over time become progressively more common in Nile silt fabrics, while the earliest examples are made with marl fabrics.

The Meroitic (Later Kushite) levels

Napatan to Meroitic transition

The most difficult group of material to date is from the Napatan to Meroitic transition. We place this around the 4th to 3rd centuries BC, though four problems currently hamper our understanding of this phase. Firstly, there are few contexts from this period. Secondly, these deposits are filled with residual Napatan sherds. Thirdly, the pottery from this period is on the whole domestic, local handmade and very similar to Late Napatan forms, which makes distinguishing residual sherds difficult. Finally, there is limited comparative material from this period and region, and the forms are quite different from those found on contemporary Egyptian sites.

There is a group of material recovered from within sandy lenses formed when the temenos gate fell into disuse and also from the final domestic levels of Areas B and Z. There are also a number of sherds in the cemetery site R18, from areas (HA2) and (JH3). However, the few complete grave goods

were of simple cup and bowl forms that were used over a long period and can only be tentatively dated to the transitional period. Also there were fragmentary sherds of this date in those areas that were of domestic storage and cooking vessels, though these appear to be residual and probably came from a nearby domestic structure, or were redeposited from a domestic deposit, possibly within mud bricks.

Napatan to Meroitic transition ceramics can be both wheel-made and handmade forms, typically with applied and impressed decoration on the rims and handles, often with applied lugs. Pots with plastic decoration such as crocodiles and other animals have close parallels from Mid and Late Napatan contexts at Kawa and Nuri, discussed above. Like many of the coarse wares these forms show considerable continuity in form from local Late Napatan ceramics. Bowl and beaker forms also show considerable continuity, though



Plate 1. Oval basin with flat base and appliquéd crocodile on the rim, from Building A1.

the latter sometimes have extensive ribbing. However, jars with straight necks and banded rims (Figure 3.5 and 3.6) begin to resemble Early Meroitic forms. The bread cones also seem different, being shorter. We also get the first Greek amphora imports, including a single 4th century BC (probably) Knidian type (fabric awaiting analysis).

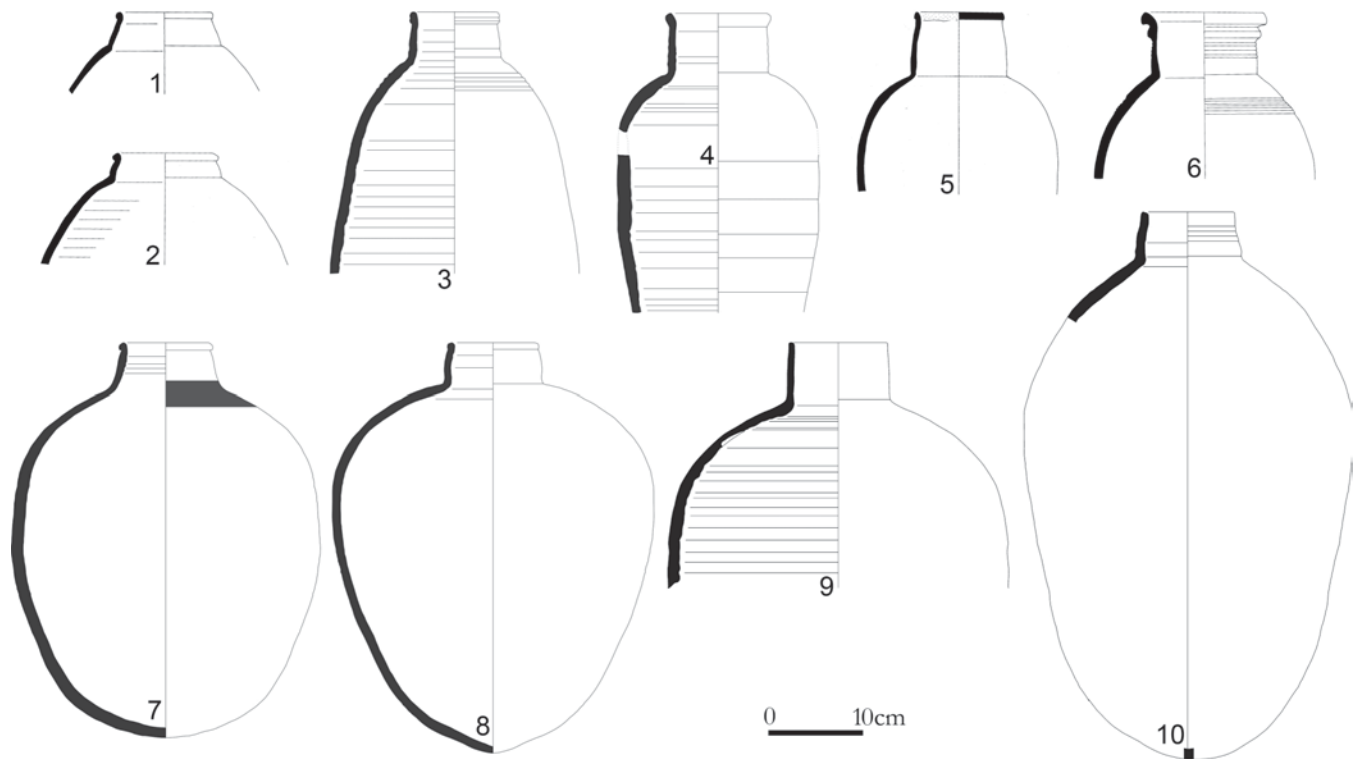


Figure 3. Kushite jar forms dating between the 7th/6th century BC and the 3rd century AD, scale 1:8.

Early Meroitic

A group of rich Early Meroitic burials, including a concentration of seven Early Meroitic burials in areas R18 (JH3) and another in (HA2), as well as the rebuilding of the temenos gate, suggests that there was a resurgence in the fortunes of 2nd century BC Kawa. The material found at Kawa thus far is a combination of well-preserved closed vessels found as grave goods and very fragmentary domestic material from surfaces and fills in the gate area. Though the quality of the material from the burials is good, it is limited in range. The material from the gate is very fragmentary and mixed, with much residual Late Napatan midden material that was used to raise and flatten the gate area for the foundations and footings of the Meroitic gate.

From the 2nd to 1st centuries BC we get typical Early Meroitic orange polished wheel-made jars (Figures 3.7, 5.1 and 5.2), with beaded or sloping rims and painted decoration, with good parallels from Qasr Ibrim and Gabati (Rose 1996a; 1996b, figs 4.13 P202b, 4.14 P1 and P2; 1998, 148 <755/2>, 151 <1101>, <1102>, <1105>). At present we have no independent evidence from Kawa that these forms may go back as far as the 3rd century BC, as suggested at Qasr Ibrim (Rose 1996a, 156), though we cannot exclude this possibility. The fabric is an orange-brown Nile silt, though sometimes a poorly mixed white Kaolinite clay and Nile silt fabric was found as jar body sherds (but at present these cannot be attributed to a specific form).

Meroitic inscriptions on two jars (Figure 5.1 and 5.2) from Grave R18 (JH3)130 can be dated palaeographically to the second half of the 2nd century BC (Claude Rilly pers. comm.).

These pots with “inscriptions of dedication” were given by (“it is from”) two individuals: Arakhasiki /Arakhasini (some unclear characters) and Weredokeli (possibly a title). It seems the deceased had wealthy and influential friends.

Black-burnished wares, also known as Sudanese-Saharan wares, were found as jar or jar fragments, with distinctive impressed and incised decoration. They were found in isolation (as at Gabati, Rose 1998, 167) in graves in area R18 (JI4) and as surface finds. Good parallels from Gabati, the Qasr Ibrim survey and Qustul, suggest an early Meroitic date (2nd century BC radiocarbon dates came from Gabati, Rose 1998, 167, 170-6) and vessels in these wares were associated with 1st century BC and possibly later pottery at Qustul (Williams 1991, 211, fig. 18).

Classic Meroitic

The classic Meroitic phase of the late 1st century BC to the 1st century AD was represented in Areas F and TG5, and at site R18. The cuts for the two kilns of uncertain function (but reminiscent of Roman technology, Welsby 2010, 50) in Area F contained a small number of 2nd to 1st century BC Early Meroitic jar fragments and transport amphora from Ephesus that were produced from the late 1st century BC onwards.

The best preserved material comes from two burials in areas R18 (JG2) and (JH3), one of which was marked probably by a large mud-brick pyramid excavated this past season (Welsby, this volume). This material includes for the first time white eggshell wares, of plain, painted and impressed forms — cups, beakers and small jars (Figure 6). Impressed forms resemble contemporary examples from the potter’s

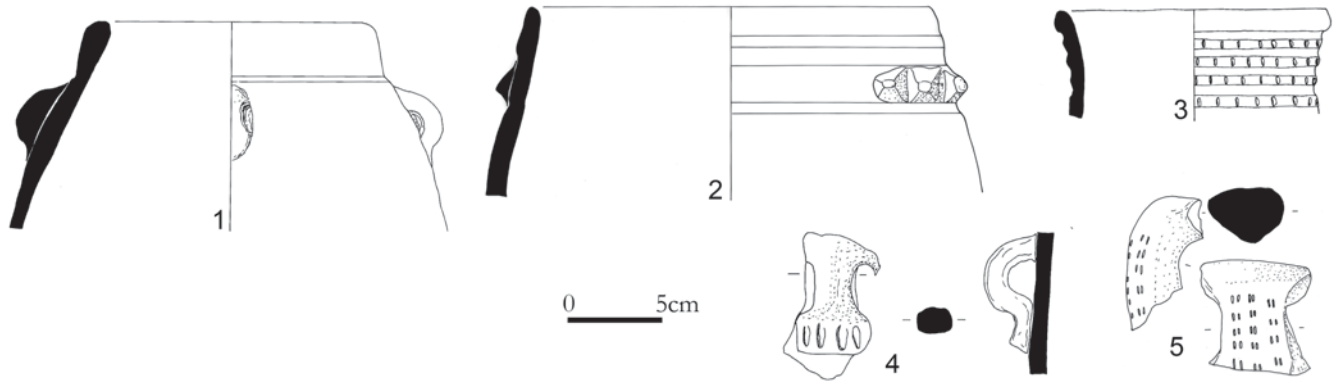


Figure 4. Transitional pottery forms, Napatan/Meroitic, scale 1:4.

workshop at Mussawarat es-Suffra (Edwards 1998; 1999a, 88-9; Seiler 1999, 196) and the Western Cemetery at Meroe (Dunham 1963, 343 fig. G, graves W 306, W 308, W139; see also Edwards 1999b). The small jar and the cups have good parallels from Meroe (Dunham 1963, 343 fig. G, 347, fig. K, grave W284) and Ballana (Williams 1991, 201-3, figs 4-5).

There was also a range of Nile silt Meroitic red wares (Adams 1986, 455). These include early forms of the standard ledge-rim bowls, red slipped with foot-ring base and painted decoration (Edwards 1999b). The red-slipped jars had globular bodies and faintly beaded rim, with a close parallel from Qustul (Williams 1991, 208, fig. 13a); they are reminiscent of the Early Meroitic jars.

Imports include a unique red-slipped Italian wine amphora with fabric from the area around the Bay of Naples. Its

production can be dated between 50 BC and the Vesuvius eruption in AD 79 as it copies Dressel 2-4 amphora forms (Peacock and Williams 1986). It is a small model of the common Campanian wine amphora form that would not have been used as a transport amphora, but instead for display or as a serving vessel.

Classic to Late Meroitic Gate Phases

Though we have a series of gate phases between the Early Meroitic and the final use of the gate, it is difficult to separate the pottery assemblage chronologically. This is partly due to the low number and poor preservation of indicator sherds found there and because of the high proportion of residual sherds in this assemblage. The wooden gate and subsequent stone gate phase both had typical 1st century AD and later, classic to late Meroitic pottery.

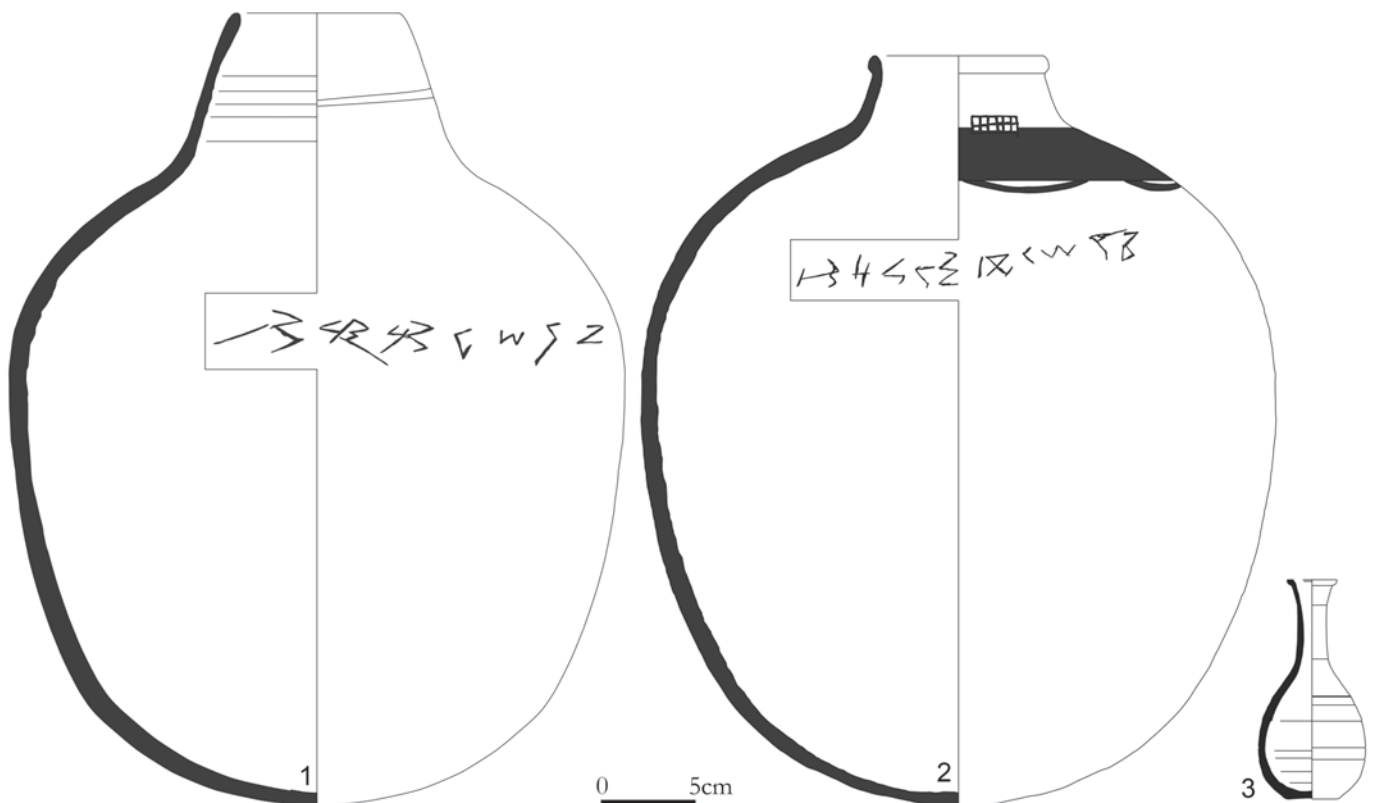


Figure 5. Early Meroitic pottery forms, scale 1:4.

The gate assemblage contained a range of coarse wares, some with parallels from Musawwarat es-Sufra (Edwards 1998; 1999a; Seiler 1999), Meroe and the Fourth Cataract. Bread cones were the most common form found, and were distinctly different from those in either transitional or Napatan contexts.

A number of imported transport amphorae, from France, North African and Cilicia, dating to the 1st to 3rd centuries AD and 3rd century AD were found within these deposits (Figure 7.2–7.4). An Egyptian amphora base of the Late Ptolemaic to Augustan period was found (Figure 7.4) (Rose 1996a, fig. 4.32 P59a; see also Tomber 1999), along with handles of the same or slightly later date (Figure 7.3). Meroitic storage jars, red slipped with straight tall necks, were common in this phase, as were red-slipped tableware such as ledge-rimmed bowls (Figure 8.1 and 8.2).

Also handmade brown-burnished ware bowls and jars with a lime-rich brown fabric were found in these contexts, similar to those recovered from contemporary burials in the Fourth Cataract (Thomas 2008) though black-burnished ware was not represented in these late contexts, suggesting it was no longer in use at this stage.

Late Meroitic

Late Meroitic pottery, dating to around the 2nd to 3rd century AD has been found in the large pyramid P2 in Area (JE3) and four graves in Area (HA2). There are no forms that can be confidently ascribed a 4th century AD date, though this cannot entirely be ruled out as a possibility.

Meroitic red-slipped storage jars, having a longer body and sloping rims (Figure 3.10), find a good 3rd century AD parallel at Ballana (Williams 1991, 209, fig. 14c). The tablewares were all of the red-slipped variety with bowls and cups having replaced the painted and impressed examples of the Classic period.

Unusual vessels were found in the heavily robbed R18 (JE3) Pyramid P2 (Welsby 2009, 72-6; 2010, 53-5) alongside standard Meroitic red-ware jars described above and presumably of the same date. These include a table amphora with flat handles and foot-ring base (Figure 7.6) of an unusual undecorated form, reminiscent of 1st to 2nd century AD Egyptian imports with painted vine decoration found at

Ballana and Qustul (Williams 1991, 222, fig. 31).

Though the main period of settlement ceased at Kawa at some point in the 3rd or 4th century AD, activities continued in the form of the robbing of mud brick for fertiliser, stone for construction and of course grave robbing for precious metals and stones. This occurred repeatedly after the abandonment of the site and although the majority of the pottery left by robbers consisted of spade sherds made from pots from adjacent graves, there were also handmade jars and pots of Post-Meroitic and Christian date that help us date some of these robbing events.

Conclusions

Our ongoing analysis of this material is producing a number of distinct phases of local ceramic style. These phases are often well dated with seals or imports. This is only a small sample and a broad-brush description of the thousands of different forms recorded in often well-stratified sequences, which will be published in more detail in the future. Published parallels for Napatan and early Meroitic pottery from stratified domestic contexts, as opposed to funerary ones, are not common, and it is hoped that the evidence from Kawa will do much to redress this imbalance.

In the earliest levels so far excavated by the SARS mission at Kawa the pottery is local and domestic in character. The local pottery production of utility wares moves from being predominantly, if not exclusively, handmade in the 9th and 8th centuries BC to overwhelmingly wheel-made thereafter. With the widespread use of the wheel the forms become more varied. The fabrics used are mainly variants on Nile silt fabrics with variation dependent on different proportions or types of inclusions, as well as firing technique. It is only in the Early to Classic Meroitic period that the character of the fabric and quality of the pottery changes notably. The low incidence of sherds or vessels showing signs of having been repaired suggests that the Nile silt wares were (unsurprisingly, given the location of the site) cheap and easy to produce; in fact, it is only large storage vessels and Napatan amphorae that generally have had ‘repair holes’ drilled through vessel wall.

By the 8th century BC, if not earlier, we begin to find imports in the form of marl fabric amphorae with rilled rims from Egypt. We get a number of Phoenician jars, particularly

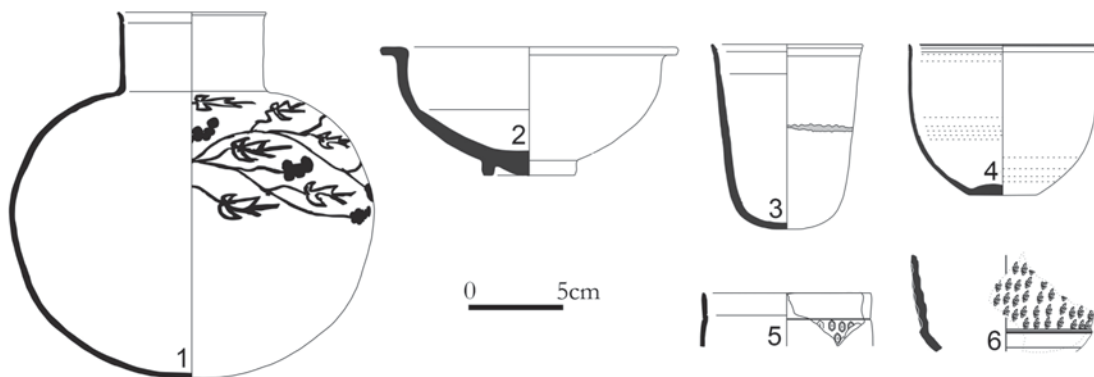


Figure 6. Classic Meroitic pottery forms, scale 1:4.

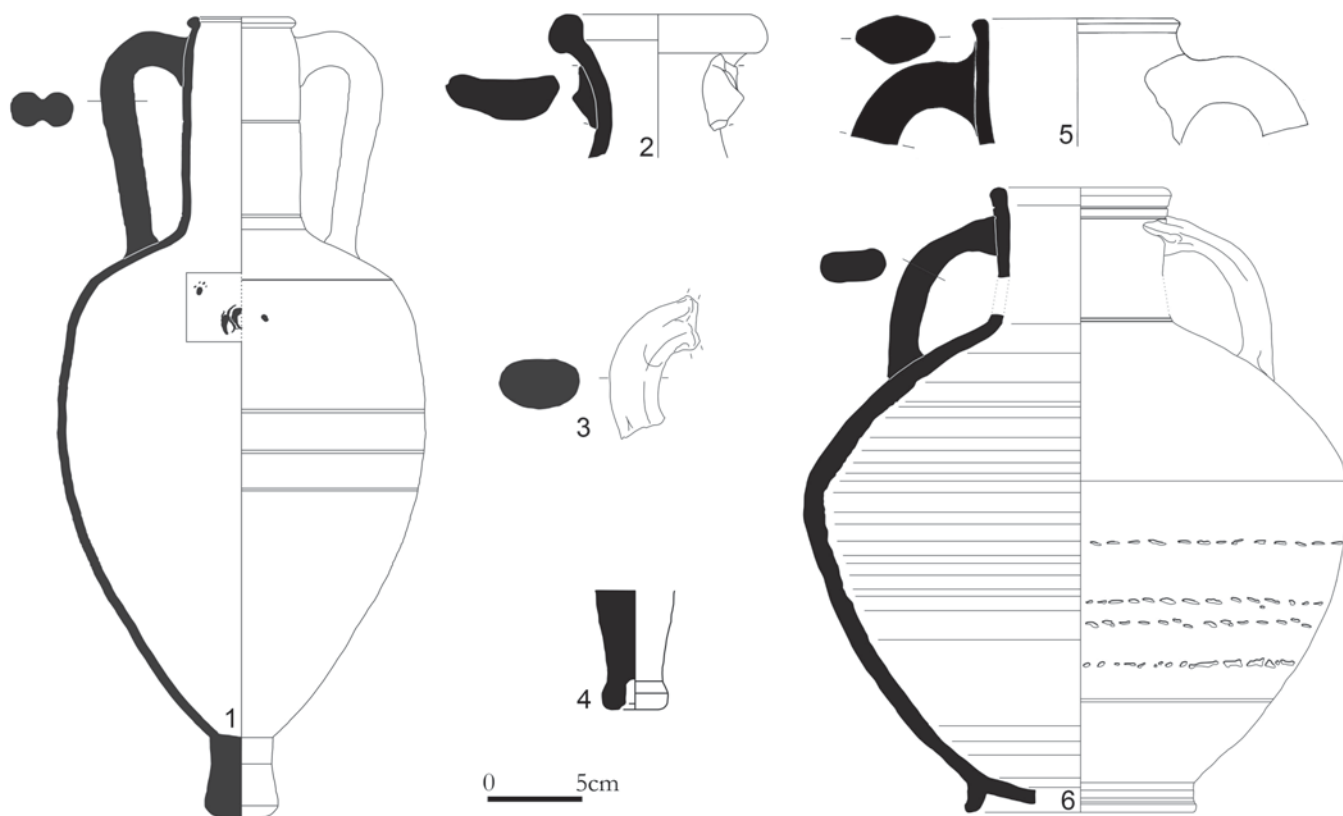


Figure 7. Meroitic period amphorae forms, scale 1:4.

in the Mid and Late Napatan levels contemporaneous with Persian rule in Egypt. Further thin-section analysis is planned to attempt to establish whether these vessels originate from different production centres in the Levant.

By the 4th century BC Mediterranean amphorae begin to be imported, but it is not until the end of the 1st century BC that we start getting Roman amphorae in some diversity from Egypt, Ephesus, Cilicia, Gaul/North Africa and Italy. Finewares do not appear to be imported, with a couple of possible exceptions. Kawa was enjoying the same kinds of imports as other major sites of the Kushite period.

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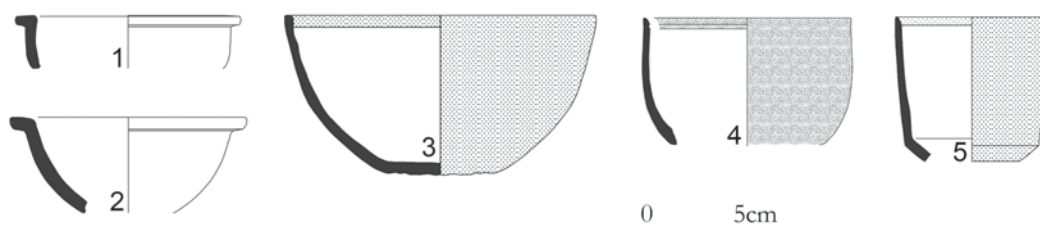


Figure 8. Late Meroitic pottery forms, scale 1:4.

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