

# SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



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Front cover: Excavations in progress in the *Kerma Ancien* cemetery at site H29 in the Northern Dongola Reach (photo D. A. Welsby).

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# Social Complexity set in Stone? The A-Group Site of Afyeh

*Alice Stevenson*

## Introduction

One of the most notable finds from the UK's contribution to the 1960s UNESCO rescue campaigns in Nubia was a stone structure associated with late 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC A-Group material at Afyeh. It remains the only substantial A-Group settlement known and it has long been cited as evidence for significant social complexity in Nubia at this time. More recently its A-Group character has been downplayed in favour of an interpretation that proposes an Egyptian origin for these structures. Assessing such claims has been made problematic in the past by the brevity of the published reports of work at the site. Fortunately, the records associated with the Egypt Exploration Society's (EES) involvement were recently made part of the Society's Lucy Gura Archive and include more detailed documentation of Afyeh's initial investigation. This provides the opportunity to evaluate the site's significance more critically, reassert its Nubian affinities and question interpretations of social organization based upon permanent architecture.

## A-Group settlements

Since Reisner first identified A-Group material in the early 20th century, an estimated 126 A-Group cemeteries and 67 settlements have been recorded (Gatto 2006, 62). Of the latter, the majority take the form of temporary camp-sites (Rampersad 2003, 91), occasionally in association with storage pits and what might be interpreted as the remains of organic structures. A few rock shelters are also known, such as Korosko East (Smith 1962, 79-90). Yet out of all these sites, only a single one has displayed substantial evidence for permanent buildings: that of Afyeh, situated in the Korosko Bend region of the Lower Nubian Nile. A handful of other locales have provided suggestive, albeit not conclusive, evidence for such architectural features. For example, Firth found traces of rubble constructions at the site of Dakka (Firth 1915, 9-10) and Smith's team also found arrangements of boulders at el-Riqa in association with A-Group pottery sherds (Smith 1962, 71), although neither the published report nor the EES fieldnotes provide further details.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding these other possible stone constructions, Afyeh has remained "by far the most important A-Group settlement" known (Nordström 1972, 21) and it is frequently cited as evidence for complex A-Group

social organisation (e.g. Geus 2006, 346; Nordström 1972, 26; Trigger 1965, 77). Trigger went as far as to suggest that "a settlement like the one at Afyeh was the residence of a local ruler" (Trigger 1965, 77).

## The site of Afyeh

In March 1961, during the EES's first season of survey, an A-Group habitation area was discovered and designated "settlement A.5". Set high on top of the western valley escarpment between two sand filled *wadis* the site had been indicated by numerous A-Group sherds within an area marked by a rubble-strewn surface. On sinking several test pits, occupation debris at a depth of 250-500mm was encountered. Given this, and the traces of stone walls and A-Group pottery, it was decided to clear a portion of the area. This revealed the plan of a single sandstone-built rectangular structure, comprised of two rooms, each featuring a north-facing outside door.

Only three pages of the season's preliminary report were given over to the discussion of the finds (Smith 1962, 59-61) and only one photograph of the structure, together with a picture of some of the flint implements and the only intact pottery vessel unearthed, were published (Smith 1962, pl. VII). A plan of the house was not included and no other pottery remains were illustrated or discussed in detail. Constraints of time meant that Smith had no alternative but to recommend that the site be fully excavated by another team. The following year an Indian mission led by B. B. Lal cleared the full extent of the 1500m<sup>2</sup> site, which was labelled 'AFH-1'. Despite exposing several further structures (never enumerated), the publication of their finds was equally limited (Ghosh 1964, 67-68; Lal 1967), and no plans of these stone constructions were included. The cursory overview that is available makes reference to a building composed of at least six rooms covering an area of some 200m<sup>2</sup> and a circular platform located to the south west of it. In this region the valley was very narrow and the possibilities for desert-edge cultivation limited. Nevertheless, large quantities of carbonized material were recovered by the Indian expedition, together with sickle blades and stone grinders, all suggesting the processing of cereals.

Attempts to locate any surviving records at the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) have so far proved fruitless. The documentation held by the EES thus represents the currently accessible resource for further discussion of the site. The archive includes a field diary, maps, plans of building A1 (Figure 1), unpublished photographs (Plates 1-3) and illustrations of a selection of the pottery (Figures 2-4) and artefacts recovered.

The building exposed by Smith's team was roughly 10m in length and perhaps up to 7m wide, judging from the measurements of features within the structures and the available photographs (no dimensions of the building are given). The walls consisted of two single lines of flatish stones, laid dry in courses, the core infilled with sand and mud. These survived up to a maximum height of 550mm. Two levels were

<sup>1</sup> The field diary entry for 25<sup>th</sup> March 1961 notes only that there was a "small area of denuded A-Gp sherds with what appeared to be the remains of circular huts of stone. The area is so small and so exposed to wind denudation that it was thought that it would not repay excavation".



Plate 1. Afyeh building 1, north door and room 1. View from the north east (Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society).

noted: Level A, composed of clean sand fill, overlying Level B, composed of sand, mud and ash within which were the remains of animal bones. Two building phases were also recognised by Lal (1967, 9).

Despite the unique nature of these structures, as Trigger (1965, 77) lamented the “available reports are not sufficiently detailed to reveal the functions of these rooms”. Fortunately, the field diary entry of 14<sup>th</sup> March 1961 does shed some light upon this, and records the presence of:

“... pounders, grindstones, querns, flint borers, knives, gouges, scrapers, shell and stone palettes, pebble rubbers, spindle whorls, whetstone (?), shell beads, finger-rings, schist bracelet (?), fragment of alabaster bowl, child’s ball (?), spindle-whorls [which] all amply prove the domestic purpose of the building. This is further confirmed by the character of the occupation debris: thick grey ash with fragments of carbon, and by the domestic arrangements in room 2. These consisted of a very large blackened pink ware storage-jar, depth 45cms, max. diam. 60cms (fragmentary and undrawable) near the centre of the room [Figure 1, feature A; Plate 3]; this had perhaps served for storage of grain as only the outside was blackened. Although the whole floor was covered with wood ash and charcoal, two definite fire pits, 40cms deep, were discovered [Figure 1, features C and D]. In proximity to one of them was a plastered circular pit, 80cms in diameter and 40cms [Figure 1, feature B] in depth, which had probably been used for vegetable preparation, washing and other cooking

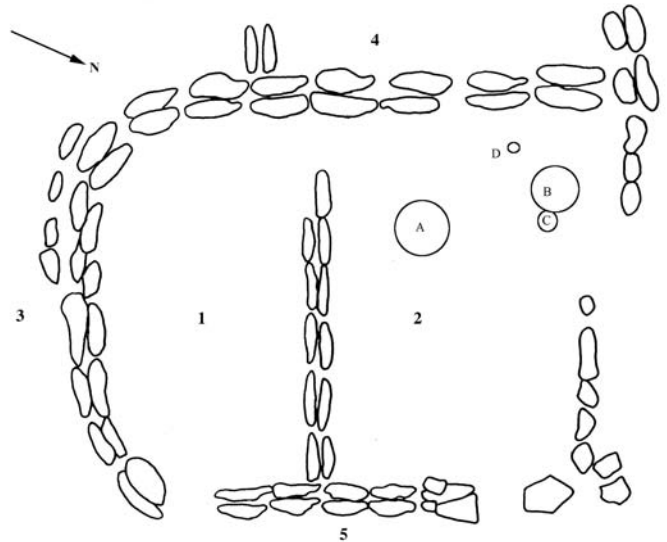


Figure 1: Plan of Afyeh building 1 (not to scale) showing rooms 1 and 2, together with areas 3-5, A. Egyptian storage-jar, B. mud-plastered circular pit, C. and D. fire pits (inked from original plans by A. Stevenson).

purposes. The cumulative effect of this evidence is to show conclusively that the room or court 2 was used as a kitchen, room 1 was perhaps a living and workroom.”

(EES Field diary 1961)

Notably, the material culture described does not differ in character from the remains of other known habitation sites.

### An Egyptian outpost?

On the basis of the pottery recovered and the architecture described, Maria Gatto (2006, 68; 2011, 91) has suggested

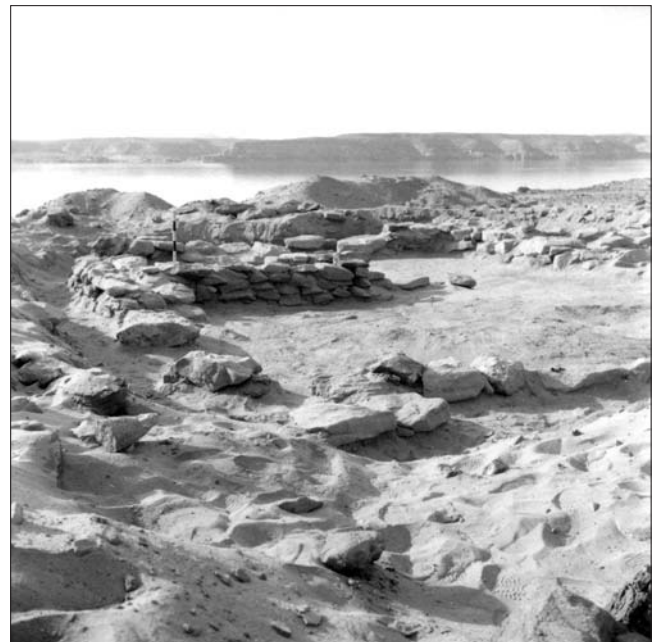


Plate 2. Afyeh building 1, room 2 in the foreground. View from the north west (Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society).

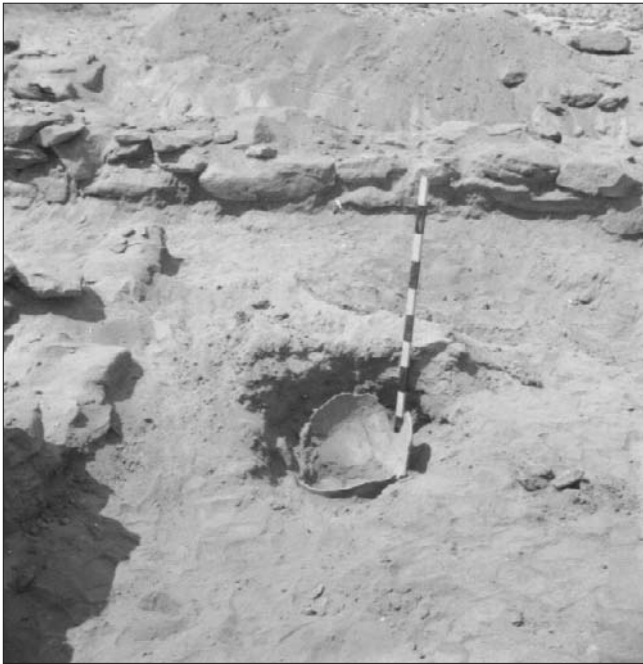


Plate 3. Large fragment of vessel found in situ in the floor of room 2. View from the north (Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society).

that Afyeh might represent an Egyptian outpost, which may have been in use subsequent to the end of the Terminal A-Group period. This is an understandable conclusion given the limitations of the published accounts. Re-examination of Smith's unpublished field notes and recent correspondence with him, however, allows the status of this site as Nubian to be reaffirmed.

First, with regard to the pottery, it is true that the few published pieces and the handful of sherds described and illustrated in the survey's notes would seem to indicate that

Egyptian products dominated the assemblage. This, however, can be explained as a result of selection bias. The EES rescue operations were conducted on a limited budget and within a restricted time frame. Smith's team had no means of transporting the material back to Khartoum or London, and there was neither the time nor the equipment to institute on-the-spot sherd-counts or fabric/ware descriptions (Smith, pers. comm.). Rather, the team had been instructed to only draw diagnostic sherds and in practice this meant the Egyptian material. For example, rim sherds are generally more robust than other parts of prehistoric vessels and often survive better in the archaeological record. Pronounced rolled and turned rims are a feature of later Predynastic Egyptian pottery manufacture, but not Nubian, and consequently this skews the picture we have of the site's recorded ceramic profile. Smith's recollections of the site are that it showed,

“... an overwhelmingly large preponderance of Nubian wares of what was then termed the ‘A-Group’ (perhaps of its later phase, as represented e.g. at Seyala)... the typical A-Group smoke-blackened, smooth brown wares, and rippled and incised and impressed coarse brown wares, in bowl and dish-shapes, were statistically most numerous among the smashed-up fragments.”

(Smith, pers. comm.).

In the field diaries the presence of sherds of what Griffith termed ‘variegated haematitic’ ware were also noted to

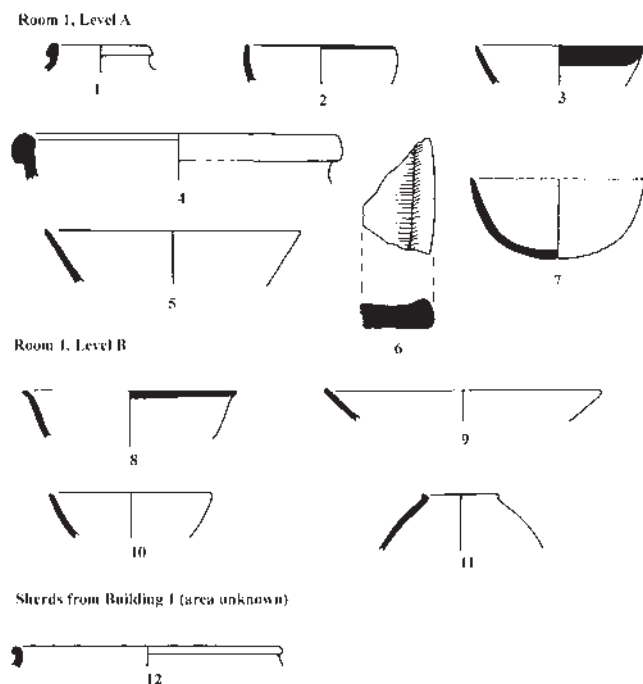


Figure 2. Afyeh. Pottery sherds from room 1, Not to scale.

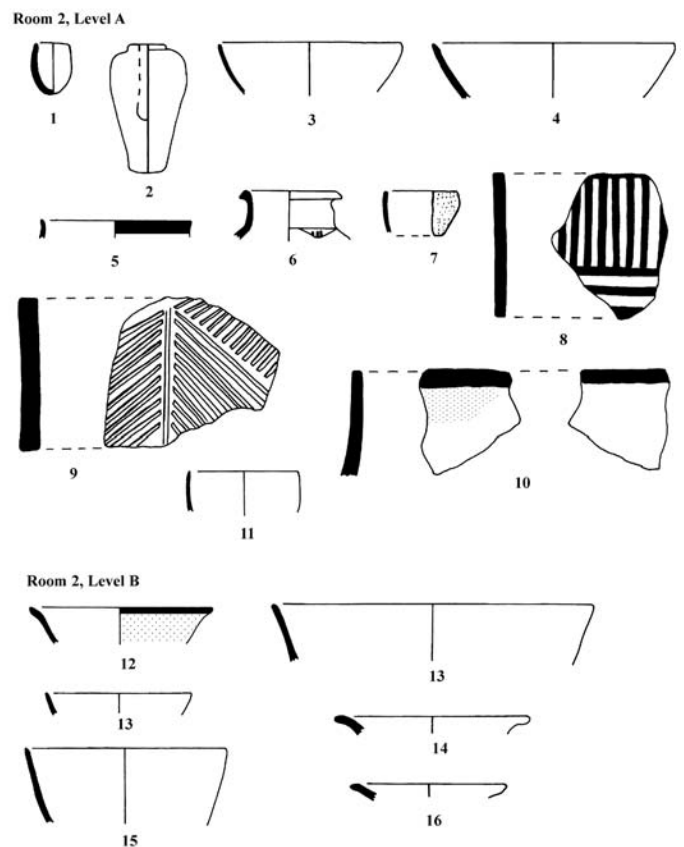


Figure 3. Afyeh. Pottery sherds from room 2, Not to scale.



Table 1. Radiocarbon dates from Afyeh.

Institution	Sample	Material	Context	Determination BP	OxCal Calibrated Date, 95% probability (calBC)	Reference
Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, India (TF)	TF-47	charcoal	Stratum 3, Field No. AFH/157	4380±115	3483-2695	Kusumgar <i>et al.</i> 1963
Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, India (TF)	TF-48	charcoal	Stratum 2, Field No. AFH1/158	4290±120	3336-2579	Kusumgar <i>et al.</i> 1963
University of Bern, Switzerland (B)	B-471	charcoal	Unknown	4500±120	3519-2902	Oeschger and Riesen 1965, 5
University of Washington (UW)	UW-30	charcoal	Stratum 3, Locus B5-2.49	4660±100	3655-3039	Fairhall <i>et al.</i> 1966, 502

have been found in level B, room 1, albeit in small quantities. More commonly known today as eggshell ware, this pottery is diagnostic of the Terminal A-Group (Nordström 1972, 29 and 64.). Similarly, other elements of the assemblage are also characteristically Nubian, including a typically-shaped quartzite palette found within the occupation debris of level A, room 2 (Smith 1962, pl. VII, 2). Like other Terminal A-Group sites, therefore, the assemblage – with its Egyptian imports and Nubian products – is one that can be characterized as belonging to indigenous Nubian communities that were culturally entangled in their interactions with their northern neighbours.

In terms of architectural parallels, Naqadian buildings in the Levant have been cited as possible comparisons to Afyeh (Gatto 2006, 68), specifically with those at 'En Besor (Gophna and Gazit 1985) and Tell Erani (Kempinski and Gilead 1991). While both constructions at these sites are rectangular, that is really the extent of any similarities. The buildings in the Levant were all erected utilizing mud brick, whereas the Nubian structures employed locally available stone. Moreover, recent examination of the EES excavation notes from the nearby Terminal A-Group cemetery of Tunqala West (Stevenson

2011; forth.) has shown that A-Group communities, in some mortuary contexts at least, did construct substantial stone tumuli. In summary, therefore, it should not be surprising to find A-Group communities erecting structures using locally available stone and it is not necessary to invoke an Egyptian connection to explain their appearance.

Turning finally to the dating of Afyeh, the four published radiocarbon dates (Table 1) for the site and the pottery have indicated to Gatto (2011, 91) that the area was occupied subsequent to the end of the A-Group presence in Lower Nubia. Yet the available radiometric dates need to be critically evaluated, not least because their measurement was undertaken in the early days of the technique when the associated error margins were much larger than today's. The contexts from which the charcoal fragments were extracted also need to be re-assessed, although these too are extremely poorly published. What can be gleaned from the available literature is that Afyeh's archaeological deposits were markedly shallow, with a maximum depth of only about half a metre (Ghosh 1964, 66). The recorded depth of the charcoal samples are even shallower: the depth of sample TF-48 was only 350mm and TF47, 450-550mm (Kusumgar *et al.* 1963, 279). Given the complexities of Nubian stratigraphy, possible intrusion and contamination cannot be ruled out. That such intrusions occurred is suggested by the rather surprising claim that cotton was found at the site by the Indian mission (Chowdhury and Buth 1970; 1972) despite the fact that such material is not otherwise attested anywhere else in Nubia for another 3000 years (Clapham and Rowly-Conwy 2009, 249; see also Fuller 2009).

The dating of Afyeh is thus largely dependent on the pottery. The aforementioned decorated eggshell ware pottery and the character of the assemblage described by Smith are certainly consistent with a Terminal A-Group date. The rim fragments drawn in the EES field notes are also attributable to the late Predynastic. The most substantial of these is the upper portion of an Egyptian cylindrical vessel found in area 4, level A (Figure 7, no. 11), which was embellished with cord markings around the rim, a form known from several other A-Group sites (compare to Reisner 1910, 329 type IX, 24). Such a specimen is equivalent to Petrie's pottery type W71a (Petrie 1921, pl. xxx) and this accords with a relative date of Naqada IIIB, prior to the onset of the Egyptian 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty.

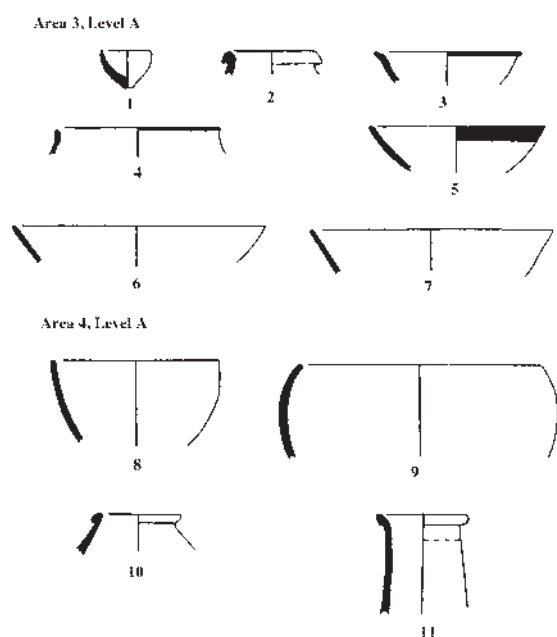


Figure 4. Afyeh. Pottery sherds from areas 3 and 4, Not to scale.

Table 2. Radiocarbon dates for the Terminal A-Group.

Institution	Sample	Material	Context	Determination BP	OxCal Calibrated Date, 95% probability (calBC)
University of Oxford (OxA)	OxA- 25409	Cow hair	SJE 277:49.12	4524±35	3361-3099
University of Oxford (OxA)	OxA-25410	Cow hair	SJE 277:49.20	4516±34	3357-3098
University of Oxford (OxA)	OxA-25411	Cow hair	SJE 277:49.20	4519±34	3358-3099
University of Oxford (OxA)	OxA-25413	Cow hair	SJE 277:65.4	4512±34	3356-3097
University of Oxford (OxA)	OxA-25414	Cow hair	SJE 277:65.4	4485±36	3347-3030
University of Oxford (OxA)	OxA-25416	Cow hair	SJE 401:49.8	4494±34	3351-3034
University of Oxford (OxA)	OXA-26210	Wooden bowl fragments	SJE 227:29:4	4460±31	3338-3021

As such, there is nothing in the pottery corpus at least to suggest a date for the site later than the last century of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC.

A set of new radiocarbon dates from Terminal A-Group contexts has recently been acquired as part of a Leverhulme-funded project,<sup>2</sup> building on approaches developed for dating the Dynastic period of Egypt (Bronk Ramsey *et al.* 2010). The specimens were selected by this author from a range of organic material from the SJE's excavations now held in the Museum Gustavianum, Uppsala University, primarily from Cemetery 277 at Halfa Degheim (Nordström 1972, 190-212). The results obtained (Table 2) are the most reliable absolute dates thus far available for the Nubian A-Group, as rather than focus on charcoal the team have deliberately sought short-lived organic material from well-documented contexts. In the case of the Nubian A-Group, the specimens tested were primarily cow hair fragments from the hides in which bodies had been wrapped. Notable amongst these dates are those from grave 49 at Cemetery 277, which also included examples of eggshell ware (Nordström 1972, 207, pl. 114). Again, these are all indicative of a time prior to the 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty and in the 95% probability calibrated range the limit of the radiocarbon determinations does not indicate that Terminal A-Group material should be dated beyond the early 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty at the latest. In summary, there is nothing at present to suggest Afyeh was occupied beyond the usually inferred date for the disappearance of the A-Group from the Lower Nubian Nile Valley archaeological record.

### Afyeh's wider context

One of the outstanding questions regarding Afyeh concerns how to accommodate it within what is known of wider A-Group settlement patterns. It has long been argued that the A-Group became increasingly sedentary towards the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC (Trigger 1965; Adams 1968, 178; 1977, 123), and Afyeh could be viewed as evidence to support such a conclusion. As Rampersad (2003) has dem-

onstrated, however, the overwhelming number of known settlement sites throughout all A-Group phases appear to be temporary camps indicating perhaps some continuity of the semi-nomadic pastoralist lifeways that had existed since Neolithic times (Gatto 2011; see also Ansfiset 2010, 108-111).

It may be unhelpful, however, to frame discussion of Afyeh with reference to simplified definitions of 'sedentism' or 'pastoralism', both of which vary synchronically and diachronically in form both between and within groups. Sedentism, for instance, is a relative state encompassing a variety of forms (e.g. Binford 1990; Kelly 1992; MacDonald 2009). While permanent structures certainly indicate increased relative sedentism, this is not necessarily commensurate with year-round habitation. Indeed, the nature of the two occupation levels at Afyeh is perhaps suggestive of some form of seasonal site abandonment. The top occupation level A was described in the fieldnotes as being composed of a 'pure sand fill', but this is difficult to reconcile with the quantity of Terminal A-Group artefactual remains found within it. What seems more likely is that the surface of the site was in fact the unrecognized wind-eroded remnants of the second occupation level, from which the artefacts found in the rather shallow, clean aeolian sand level A had percolated down to through time, either through wind action or human/animal passage (Smith, pers. comm). The clean sand, therefore, may represent an interval between occupations, one that perhaps was only a seasonal rather than major break in the site's usage. In any event, the evidence from one site alone need not be indicative of the way of life of a society as a whole (Rampersad 2003, 102).

Similarly, pastoralism is a flexible strategy often used in combination with other cultivation and foraging practices (e.g. see debates concerning Middle Bronze Age Levant: Berelov 2006). Ultimately, it may be premature to attempt to delineate any clear lines between subsistence modes for the A-Group given that there exists such a paucity of faunal data for the majority of Nubian sites and we still have a very poor sense of which plant remains, especially wild varieties, were in use and available on a regular basis. Nevertheless, given the marginal nature of the Middle Nile environment it is likely that multiple subsistence resources were exploited

<sup>2</sup> The project represents a collaboration between the University of Oxford, UCL and Cranfield University and is composed of the following team members: Christopher Bronk Ramsey (PI), David Wengrow (CoI), Andrew Shortland (CoI), Michael Dee, Fiona Brock and Alice Stevenson.





at this time (Gatto 2006, 71). Furthermore, in view of the recent evidence that has emerged for A-Group communities in the desert regions at Laqiya (Lange 2003) and the Wadi Shaw (Lange 2006) it seems that at least some segments of the A-Group population were engaged in seasonal movements. Such diversity and complexity is poorly served by overarching social evolutionary terms such as ‘chiefdom’ or ‘state’ which are the most commonly employed concepts used in the characterization of Nubian societies. The narrative linearity of social progression that such models encourage may also be misleading given the multi-dimensionality of mobility patterns within societies, which allows for fluidity in social formations over time (Kelly 1992, 49-50).

Given the broader picture of variable A-Group landscape use that is emerging, a site such as Afyeh might be envisaged as a form of central place that tethered segments of more mobile groups – elites perhaps (Török 2009, 41) or other community specialists – in their movements between the Nile and the desert. Significant in this regard is the site’s location in the Korosko Bend region at the juncture of several desert routes (Gatto 2006, 68). Afyeh is also notably situated between what have been interpreted as the two main districts or ‘centres’ of the Terminal A-Group, namely the Sayala–Gerf Hussein area to the north and the Qustul–Faras–Gamai area to the south (Nordström 2004, 141-142, fig. 7). What the Afyeh structures might, therefore, reflect is the importance of this intersection between desert environs and Nile spaces of activity for A-Group communities. The idea of certain central locales within mobile or semi-mobile societies may also serve interpretation of the unique site of Khor Daud far better, which with its multitude of storage pits containing imported vessels from Egypt is often considered to be a bartering place (Nordström 1972, 26.). There thus remains much to explore with regard to how we conceptualise a site like Afyeh. As such, we should be wary of making hasty conclusions regarding past social structure on the basis of stone edifices alone.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Michael Dee for commenting on the radiocarbon dates from this site. Acknowledgements are also due to Chris Naunton, Roo Mitcheson, Joanne Kyffin and Alice Williams at the EES for their help in facilitating access to the Lucy Gura Archive. Finally, I am greatly indebted to Harry Smith for all his help and encouragement, as well as for sharing his insights.

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