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## Child Burials of The Nubian A-Group

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### Introduction

In the area between the First and the Second cataracts, more exactly, between Kubaniya in the north, and Semna-Kumna cataract in the south, the archaeological surveys brought to light finds attributable to the Nubian A-Group. About 75 cemeteries were recorded, not including sites with only one or two graves (Nordström 2004). Most of them belong to the Middle and Terminal phases, 3400-3000 BC.

Distributed along both banks of the Nile, they were placed preferably on small land rises of ancient silt formations above a rocky substratum and covered by aeolian sand. They were often found in proximity to the alluvial plane and near fossil tributaries, which were probably still seasonally active at that time.

The subject of my study is the children of the Nubian A-Group. I think it is meaningful to throw light on a social category that may be a rich information source for still hidden aspects of this appealing culture. The logical start has been to collect all available data on the burial customs. This was completed in a *Mémoire de maîtrise* at the Lille university (Zegretti 2001)<sup>1</sup>.

The first surprising result of this investigation comes precisely from the amount of child burials found in the published A-Group record: there are 41 cemeteries with a total of 373 children. These have all been included in a data base with details taken from the available publications. On some sites only 2-3% of the burials consist of children, while several cemeteries can hold 40-50% most likely depend-

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1 This topic was given to me by Francis Geus in 2001.

ing on different chorological phases when child burials were first more and then less common, and on social differences between different cemeteries (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Amount of Children Graves in the A-Group sites.  
Number and percentage of graves

Site	Tot. n° Graves	A-Gr. Graves	%	Children Graves	%
ASN I 7	361	277	76,7	26	9,3
ASN I 17	98	81	82,6	3	3,7
ASN I 14	55	22	40	7	31,8
ASN I 30	13			2	15,3
ASN I 23	74	20	27	4	20
ASN I 41:200	43	43	100	8	18,6
ASN I 41:400	31	31	100	7	22,5
ASN I 40	37			2	5,4
ASN I 45	511	160	31,3	9	5,6
ASN I 43	82	26	31,7	5	19,2
ASN I 44	32	32	100	2	6,2
ASN II 73	104	75	72,1	14	18,6
ASN II 76	136	58	42,6	10	17,2
ASN II 79	141	136	96,4	31	22,7
ASN II 80	23	23	100	4	18,1
ASN II 83	12	4	33,3	1	25
ASN II 88	9	9	100	1	11,1
ASN IV 110	334	45	13,4	1	2,2
ASN III 98	101	19	18,8	1	5,2
ASN III 101-102	394	394	100	62	15,7
ASN III 103	40	40	100	2	5
ASN IV 111	91	80	87,9	4	5
ASN IV 136	23	23	100	3	13
ASN IV 134	20	20	100	7	35

Site	Tot. n° Graves	A-Gr. Graves	%	Children Graves	%
ASN IV 148	45	45	100	2	4,4
E&K 168	32	21	65,6	8	38
E&K 166	80	76	95	14	18,4
E&K 204	59	12	20,3	1	8,3
E&K 206	37	37	100	14	37,8
E&K 215	123	123	100	29	23,5
OINE L	33	33	100	2	6
OINE W	88	34	38,6	12	35,2
OINE V	85	11	12,9	1	9
OINE T	8	8	100	4	50
SJE 292	20	20	100	10	50
SJE 308	37	36	96,2	1	2,7
SJE 187	35	35	100	1	2,8
SJE 332	72	26	36,1	5	19,2
SJE 401	46	31	67,3	3	9,6
SJE 277	66	66	100	28	42,4

It is quite an important and impressive presence, if related to the period in question, and also in relation to the subsequent periods of Nubian antiquity.

Analysing data from such a rich information source, many aspects can be considered, not only of the children's funerary treatment but also of their life and social position, and the relationship between childhood and adulthood.

First of all, we can outline the general features of child burials of the Nubian A Group.

### Child Burial Practices

Children were interred in simple pits dug in the sand, usually without digging into the harder silt or sandstone subsoil, constituting often the bottom of the shaft (Fig. 2).

Without any traces of superstructures and despite the fact that their presence is already attested since the Final Palaeolithic and in almost all periods in Sudan (Reinold 2006, p. 141), we could suppose there were not any coverings at all, or that they were made in perishable materials.

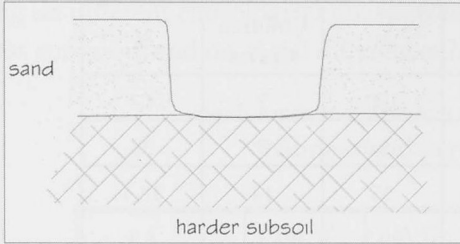


Fig. 2. Pit.

The sporadic presence in three cemeteries (ASN III 101-102, ASN IV 134) of stone blocks may indicate that, originally, a part of them was sealed.

Most of the graves are not especially arranged, with rather standardized outlines (Fig. 3). The most diffused is the oval shape (type 2), with vertical or nearly vertical walls, flat bottom and rounded corners.

Nevertheless, in six cemeteries they have a more complex arrangement, with one or two lateral chambers to lodge the deceased (Fig. 4).

Their dimensions change a lot according to the size and the number of bodies: 40 to 150 cm in length for single burials, while multiple ones can exceed 2m. Depth is on average 1m, depending on the degree of erosion.

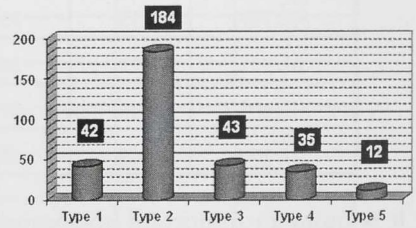
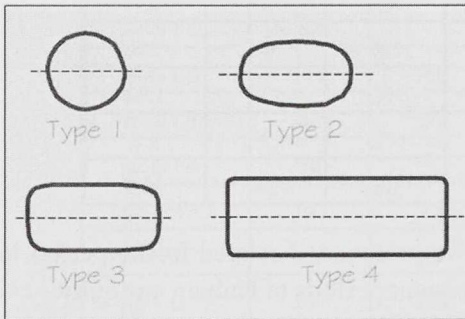


Fig. 3. Outlines of the shaft.

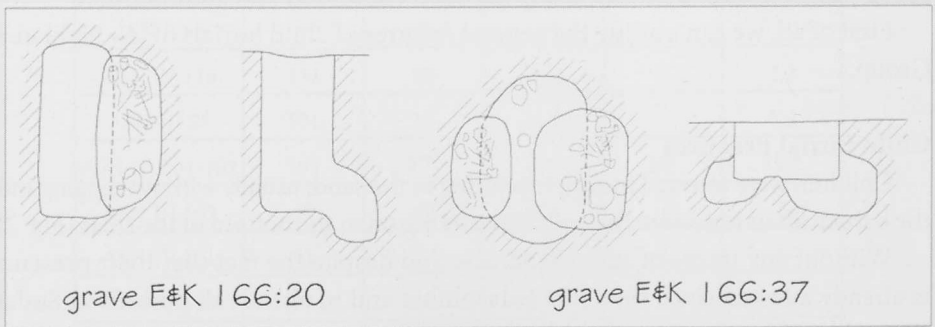


Fig. 4. Shafts with one and two lateral chambers.

Remarkable data concerns shaft orientation (Fig. 5): about 82% of them are approximately oriented following a S-N direction. It may be linked to a custom belonging to the whole A-Group culture which gives graves the same orientation as the local direction of the Nile flow. As a consequence, the longitudinal axis of the graves slightly fluctuates in a range including the SW/NE and SE/NW orientation.

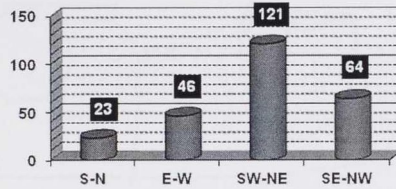


Fig. 5. Orientation of the shafts.

The body lies more or less in the middle of the shaft bottom or, if there's a lateral chamber, in the middle of its floor. Placed usually in direct contact with the sand, in several cases (34 graves) it is nevertheless protected by linen, or kid or goat hide pieces, often painted red and covering the shaft or wrapping the body (ASN I 7, 14, 17, 23, 41, 45 and ASN II 79). In these seven cemeteries, a very high density of burials presenting these features may indicate that it was a norm, excluding hence any sort of social status differentiation, which occurs instead in other contemporary culture customs like, for example, in Kadruka 1 cemetery, where this sort of careful arrangement is reserved for the richest grave of the most important male personage of the community (Reinold 2006).

Nothing confirms the presence of cloths: subject to decomposition, small fragments inside the grave could have belonged to both cloths and woven pieces. The only exception is a belt found in a grave that could indicate a real existence of clothing (ASN I 7:123).

Interring infants in pot burials, attested largely in Late Neolithic Central Sudan (Reinold 1986) which have several affinities with the A-Group, is nevertheless atypical for the last one: only four children have been placed into big pots or jars, or covered by an upside-down pot (ASN I 41:404-406, E&K 168:15, OINE T:110). The common use and the quality of chosen pots should not indicate a privileged condition of these burials, despite their peculiarity.

The most common position of the body, as a consequence of secondary movements caused by plunders or decomposition of fleshy parts of the corpse, is lying on its side, preferring the left side, but it doesn't constitute a general rule.

Legs are always contracted or completely contracted; arms may be straightened along the body, slightly contracted, or contracted with hands in front of or on the face. The more contracted position could have been facilitated by laces or

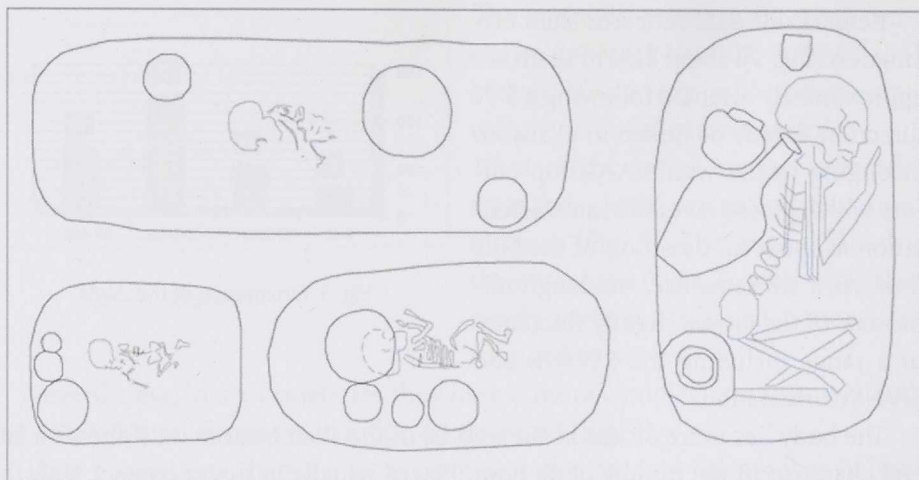


Fig. 6. Position of funerary goods into the shaft.

cloth bags (Reinold 1991, pp 12, 22), as the presence of these materials inside the shafts suggests.

According to the orientation of the shafts, the head is usually in a SW direction, while the direction of the face is data mainly specified on the most recent excavation reports (in 81 graves descriptions on 373) and then the information is only partial.

The same goes for the children age. Even if it is recorded in the publications, it is often quite questionable because too subtle differences referring to age as, for instance, “newborn” and “still-born”, were made for children dead soon after or soon before their birth.

### Funerary Offerings

In almost all graves the deceased is accompanied with his funerary offerings placed into the shaft without keeping special rules. These offerings are found isolated as well as regrouped in an empty corner, around or above the body (fig. 6). However, later violations of the burials make bringing data on the exact position of the goods very difficult.

Regarding children, funerary gifts consist mostly in personal adornments. Beads, bracelets and necklaces have been found in almost all graves, associated in indifferent way to both adults and children, male and female. Beads (fig. 7-a) of different size and shape (cylindrical, ring, drop, flower-shape ...) as well as materials (ostrich egg, bone, ivory, faience, carnelian, ...), are applied to wrists, arms, ankles, neck and waist, often enriched with amulets and pendants.

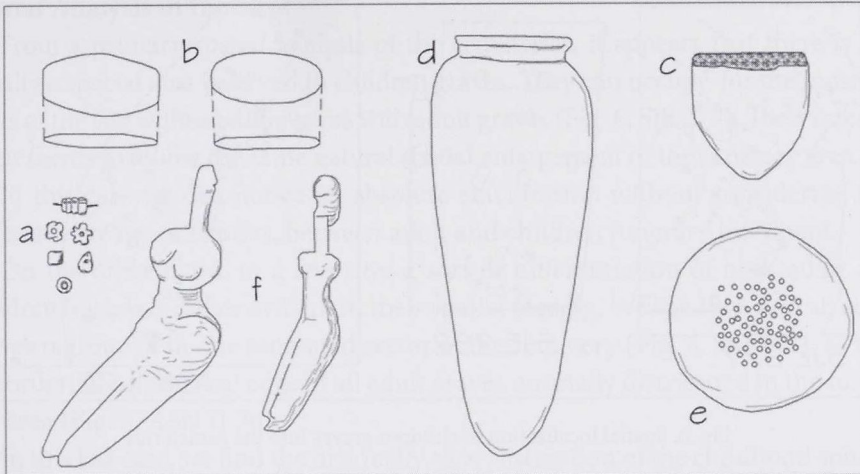


Fig. 7. Funerary offerings.

Finger rings are less common in child burials, made in bone, eggshell, ivory and copper; hair pins in wood and copper; ivory combs; leather bags and caps; black feather fans.

Utensils such as awls, axes, knives, found frequently in adult graves, are not included among children funerary goods. They may indicate an active participation of the adults to works and to a social life and status; therefore they are excluded from the inventory associated to children.

Stone palettes (Fig. 7-b) are typical in child burials, with oval, rectangular and rhomboidal shape, zoomorphic sometimes imported from Egypt, often associated to rounded pebbles used as pestle.

Associated only with children burials (Nordström 1972 I: 122), we find several ostrich eggshells. In recorded graves there are 12 of them, and two of these are decorated with human and animal patterns. Their aim was probably to contain liquids, but on the other hand, their nourishing properties could be another possible reason for their presence.

An exception is one goose eggshell (ASN III 102:96) and four tortoise carapaces (all in ASN I 7:254).

Pottery is an important category among children funerary offerings.

It is an index of largely diffused and developed local production; it confirms, on the other hand, the more well-known and more intensified commercial trade between Lower Nubia and Upper Egypt. As a consequence, besides a predominant presence of typically local red black-topped ware bowls (Fig. 7-c), we can see just as many imported pink ware jars (Fig. 7-d).



Fig. 8. Spatial localization of children graves into the cemeteries.

As noted by Nordström (Nordström 2004), pottery strainers (Fig. 7-e) are present only in children graves and are frequently associated with an ostrich egg. Among all child graves, six strainers have been recorded, all coming from cemeteries E&K 215 near Abu Simbel and SJE 277 in Halfa Degheim, excavated by Emery and Kirwan and the Scandinavian Joint Expedition respectively. These sites have several affinities in size, period and amount of child burials, and both similar cemeteries have the same curious peculiarity of the presence of pottery strainers linked to children burials, an evident sign of a special and precise choice hiding a symbolic significance that is still unclear. We could perhaps consider them as fundamental elements to prepare the children's food, made up likely of ostrich eggs, which may also represent an eternal food source, as interpreted by Nordström (1996; 2004).

It is unusual to find objects such as figurines in Lower Nubia (Nordström 1972 I: 120). Inside recorded child burials we find five of them, made in chalk with zoomorphic shape, such as frog and hawk, and with anthropomorphic steatopygia shape (Fig. 7-f), made in grey-brown ware, associated to female burials.

Regarding funerary offerings, we have to consider that they may have been placed in the shaft and chosen by mourners. Evident wear traces let us nevertheless suppose that these goods should not have a purely funerary destination. This feature may attribute minor importance to child burials. On one hand they were used daily and, when the children died, chosen as funerary gift, having likely a symbolic significance still incomprehensible to us.



### Spatial Analysis of the Sites

From a primary spatial analysis of the cemeteries, it appears that there is not usually a special area reserved to children graves. They can occupy, for the most, all parts of the site without differences with adult graves (Fig. 8, SJE 277). Their interment seems to follow the same natural spatial enlargement of the funerary area.

In this case we can notice an absolute equalization without considering any difference in age categories, between adult and children funerary treatment.

On the other hand, in a few sites a sort of differentiation of both adult and children burials is rather evident in their spatial placing. We can thus find all child graves regrouped in one separated sector of the cemetery (Fig. 8, SJE 292), as well as bordering on external edge of all adult graves normally distributed in the funerary area (Fig. 8, ASN II 76).

In this last case, we find the first really clear distinction of the childhood sphere, still not integrated with the socially active adult age.

### Multiple Burials

Children are usually interred individually, but 19% of shafts hold two to five bodies.

Among the 67 recorded multiple burials, only 12 graves hold children exclusively (Fig. 9, ASN II 79:117), never more than two of them together. In one case only, a child is accompanied with an animal.

Most multiple burials include adults with one child or more. They are 75, and it is difficult to establish if this practice involves for the most women or men, because their sex is not always identified or comprehensible. The only explicit data we dispose indicate that there is not a marked preference to bury adults of one chosen sex with children: women are in fact 32, while men are 25.

We usually find one adult interred with one child (Fig. 9, ASN I 45:403), except for two isolated cases where children there were two or three, and where one grave held a woman, a child and an animal.

In this category we also include two burials of women with their foetuses.

Where adults are two, we could perhaps, but not exclusively, label it "family-burial", since it includes a couple of adults together with their children (Fig. 9, SJE 277:33), apart from three graves where two women are buried with children. Four graves give us exceptional examples: one child buried with three adults of the same sex, both male and female.

Several multiple burials are the result of a repeated opening of the same shaft with the aim to inter deceased, likely members of the same family, at different times.

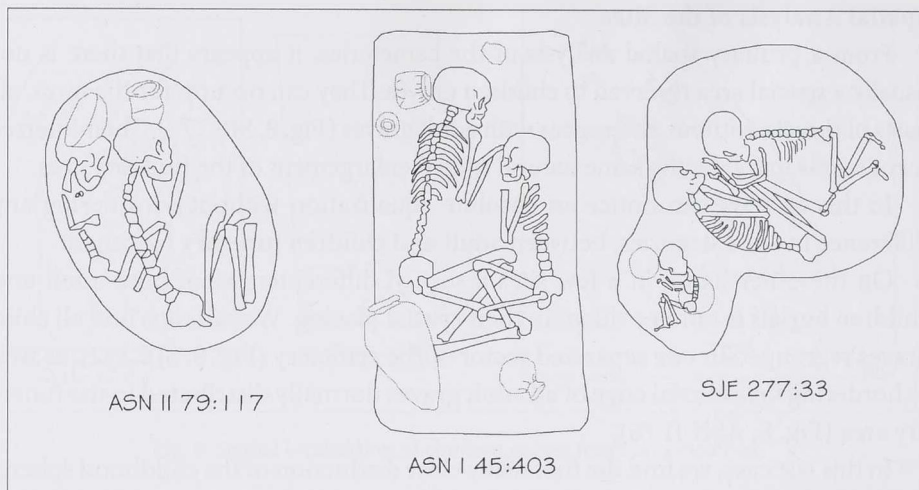


Fig. 9, Multiple burials.

Their position inside the shaft is, in fact, superposed on different levels.

On the other hand, the bodies interred at the same time lie always both on the same side, otherwise in symmetric position.

### Conclusions

Concluding this preliminary analysis of the basic features of the A-Group child burials, we can remark that burials of all age categories were represented in the cemeteries. Children, infants, new-borns and even foetuses were provided with a burial rite, exactly like the funerary treatment of adults.

Parents, relatives and members of the same clan also organized a worthy preparation for the eternal after-life for these children.

Apart from this first result, many questions arise. Some of them:

- Are child burials simply a reflection of infant mortality rates?
- It is clear that children enjoyed a very careful funerary treatment, but may it stand in contrast to the reality of the children's lives?
- Did they have a special place in daily social life, or was their death charged with extraordinary symbolic significance?
- Why do some cemeteries have a significant proportion of child burials (i.e. cemeteries E&K 215 and SJE 277) while other cemeteries have no or very few children? Is there a chronological difference in this respect?

This rather unexplored subject is quite worthy of more detailed and comprehensive investigations.

I hope to answer these and other questions in future work, where the main approach should be:

- a comparative ethnographic study of the transition from birth to childhood and from childhood to adulthood and its significance for understanding of the A-Group social structure;
- ranking child burials and in other ways analyse their funerary equipment in order to outline the social position of children;
- differences and similarities of the A-Group and contemporary burials in Egypt and Nubia.

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### Abbreviations

ASN: Archaeological Survey of Nubia

SJE: Scandinavian Joint Expedition

Example: ASN I 7:123 = Archaeological Survey of Nubia, vol. I, Cemetery 7, Grave 123

Example: E&K 166: 37 = Emery and Kirwan, Cemetery 166, Grave 37