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Contacts between the Nubian "A-Groups" and Predynastic Egypt

Evidence of the sites related to the so-called A-Group culture can be found between Wadi Kubbania and Melik en Nassir (Nordström 1972). According to the latest calculations the origins of this culture date back to 3700 B.C., coinciding with the Amratian/Nagada I phase in Egypt. Its end occurred when the Egyptian Protodynastic era came into being, that is to say ca. 3150 B.C. (Williams 1986).

A study that we are carrying out, on the material coming from Nubian sites related to the A-Group, underlines the close contacts between Lower Nubia and Upper Egypt during the 4th millennium B.C.

At first, this analysis was based on pottery, which, once examined, provided interesting information. Firstly, the traditional Egyptian pottery was separated from the Nubian one, and this division has proved that the distribution was heterogeneous in the area taken into account. In fact the proportion of the Egyptian pottery in the area between the First Cataract and Mediq is far greater than that in the area from Mediq to Melik en-Nassir.

The Egyptian pottery is different from the Nubian one both in shape and temper. In the northern part of Lower Nubia the most frequent shapes are vessels of Petrie's "B (black-topped)" class, typical of the Nagada I phase, and wavy-handled jars, "D (decorated) ware" and "L (late)-ware", while in southern Lower Nubia only jars of "L" class are common. Unusual pottery shapes, for example in cemetery L of Qustul, occur seldom. Some examples from Qustul are the vessels with long, undulating neck (24a, b, of Petrie's "F-fancy-class") and specimens of pedestals, e.g. L 5A, the surface of which is decorated with three snakes in relief, climbing upwards (Williams 1986). In most cases the matrix is made of a type of clay which fires to a hard pink surface colour.

In order to give a fuller picture of the type of contact which existed between Egypt and Nubia we have examined the remaining materials of larger cemeteries: Cem. 7 Shellal (Reisner 1910); Cem. 17 Khor Bahan (Reisner 1910); Cem. 76 Gerf Hussein (Firth 1912); Cem. 79 Gerf Hussein (Firth 1912); Cem. 137 Sayala

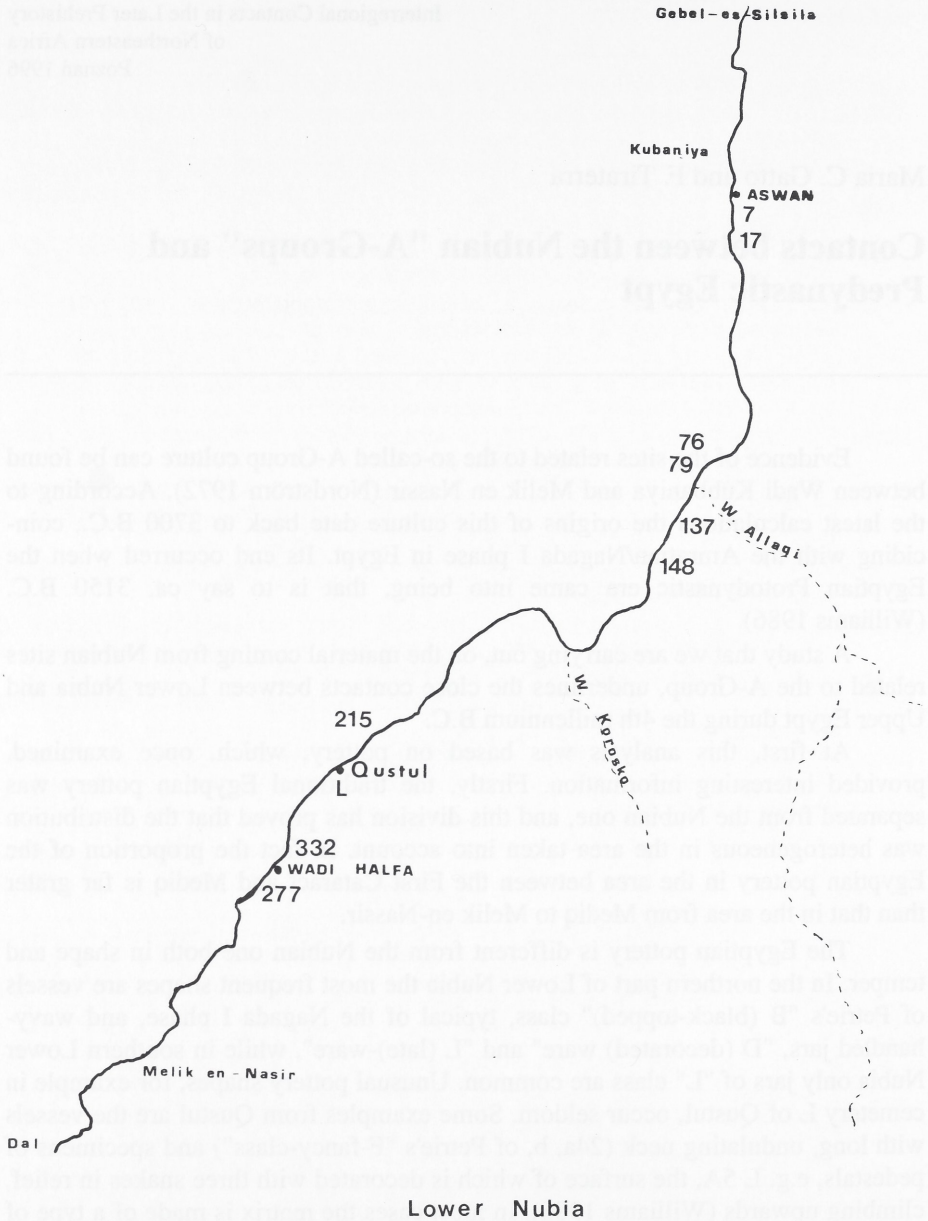


Fig. 1. Nubian A-Group sites in Lower Nubia.

7 Shellal. 17 Khor Bahan. 76 Gerf Hussein. 79 Gerf Hussein. 137 Sayala. 148 Mediq.
215 Abu Simbel. L Qustul. 332 Ashkeit. 277 Halfa Degheim.

(Firth 1927); Cem. 148 Mediq (Firth 1927); Cem. 215 Abu Simbel (Emery & Kirwan 1935); Cem. L Qustul (Williams 1986); Cem. 332 Ashkeit (Nordström 1972); Cem. 277 Halfa Degheim (Nordström 1972).

Interestingly, eight of the ten cemeteries are located north of Qustul (including the latter) and only 2 south of it (Fig. 1). All these cemeteries are similar, apart from their dimensions, because they are located in strategic areas along the Nile: Shellal and Khor Bahan are near the First Cataract, which bordered on Egypt during the Old Kingdom; Gerf Hussein, Sayala and Mediq near the mouth of Wadi Allaqi, the area of gold mining; Ashkeit and Halfa Dagheim are located in the area of the Second Cataract near the border between Egypt and Kerma, where the fortresses of Mirghissa and Buhen were built during the Middle Kingdom; Abu Simbel and Qustul were supposedly located in a place in the valley where the access to the Western Desert and therefore the Oasis was easier.

Concerning non-ceramic materials, a difference can be observed between north and south. For example, the palettes found in cemeteries in the north can be compared to those of the Predynastic of Egypt, whereas those coming from cemeteries in the south are simpler and have a different typology.

Golden maces and amulets of precious stones making use of Egyptian-inspired iconography (heads of falcon, scorpion, elephant etc.) are frequently found in the northern area, whereas south of Qustul they are unusual. In the area excavated by Scandinavian Joint Expedition the most frequent materials found are mortars, grinding stones, pestles, pebbles, awls, leather, cattle skin, wood, ochre and resins.

Even in this case Qustul stands as an exception. Besides the large amount of stone vases, fayence vases, traditional Syro-Palestinian and Sudanese pottery, metal, ivory objects (including parts of toys also found in Egypt) and models of bread, we should emphasize the epigraphic and artistic features of this site. Most characteristic are the incense burners (L 24 1) depicting a procession of boats in front of a *serekh*.

On the grounds of the difference of material between those two areas, one might assume that there was a difference in the socio-economic level as well. North of Qustul trade with the Upper Egypt probably played a major role in the economy and therefore in the social structure of the local population. South of Qustul on the other hand, the prevalence of materials associated with an agro-pastoral economy reveals a different socio-economic situation, much closer to the Sudanese area and with less trade with Upper Egypt.

In this framework, the Cemetery L of Qustul has an anomalous position, since the quantity of traditional Egyptian material is greater than that of neighbouring cemeteries and its typology is unusual compared to that of other Nubian cemeteries. According to Williams, the iconographic elements, typical of the Pharaonic period, which occur at that site might suggest that monarchs existed

earlier than "pharaohs" both in Nubia and Egypt, that is to say earlier than King Scorpion (Williams 1986, 1987).

Williams' theory is based on the fact that in Egypt rare evidence of the Pharaonic symbolism related to the Predynastic period is of a more recent phase, that that found at Qustul.

We can assume, therefore, that both in Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia the cultural situation was homogeneous, consisting of power centres in contact with each others, above all for trade purposes. At a certain time, the situation reversed in favour of Upper Egypt, a region with greater advantages than Nubia (i.e. proximity to the Mediterranean area, more favourable geo-climatic situation), which facilitate and led to the unification and the creation of the pharaonic state.

The difference between the two Nubian areas, whose population was made up of groups sharing the same cultural horizon, though without a common socio-economic evolution, might indicate that the term A-Group, in our opinion, should be changed to "A-Groups".

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