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Neolithic sites on the White Nile

The aim of this paper is not to present an analytic study of the subject as much as to throw some light on a long forgotten area of the White Nile by using it as an example for the threat facing archaeological sites in the Sudan.

One of the most dangerous problems causing great damage to the antiquities is the lack of co-ordination between various governmental administrations and departments for the protection of the national heritage. The best example of this problem could be the El-Dueim-Rabak road, built by the German company "Strabag" between 1982 and 1984. Numerous sites along the road were used as quarries for the soil needed to build the pavement. Among the most badly affected by such activity is the site of El-Kawa. Information concerning these losses came to the Antiquity Service from the soil engineer of the company. Mr. Horace Cook brought to the Antiquity Service office a good deal of archaeological material collected by him from El-Kawa and other sites along the road. The material consisted of pottery sherds, lithic tools, and even a complete bowl, most probably of a Post-Meroitic origin.

Due to the information gained from Mr. Cook and others, the Service decided to inspect the area. This inspection was conducted by Patrice Lenoble from the French Unit, and myself, from May 2nd to 6th in 1984. The inspection included sites on both sides of the White Nile beginning at El-Kawa, as well as Aba Island and Kenana area.

Despite its archaeological richness, the White Nile has received very little attention. The work of Arkell in Kosti (Arkell 1950: 24-40) was followed by a few operations by Marshall and Abd El-Rahman Adam at Ushara south of Omdurman (Marshall & Adam 1953: 40-46), Crawford at Geteina (Crawford 1953a: 1-29; 1953b) and more recently the excavation at Shabona in the early 70's by D. Clark (1989: 389-410). Further to the south, Else Kleppe worked in the area of Malakal in 1976. Randy Haaland and Ali Tigani were in Rabak and Gebel Tomat in 1983. Since 1972 several inspections were carried out by Khidir Adam Eisa, F. Geus, Salah Omer, Gamal M. Idris and Abd Alla El Nazir. Most of this work was based on sporadic finds, and was limited to the eastern bank of the river.

El Kawa

El-Kawa lies some 250 kilometres south of Khartoum on the right bank of the White Nile. This area geologically is part of the clay terrace of the eastern bank. On this terrace twelve sites related to various periods from Neolithic to Funj were registered around the town. All were mapped by two measured bearings standing on the opposite bank. Some sites were large mounds, obviously settlements, in many cases with cemeteries connected to them at the lowest levels.

Qoz Farrah, "The Borrow Pit" forming one of the major soil sources needed for building the road pavement, was a large mound located just a few kilometres east of El-Kawa. Undoubtedly it had been the highest mound in the area, extending for more than one kilometre long and almost two metres high. The thickness of the deposit and the variety and richness of its artifacts, point to a lengthy settlement. Enormous quantities of pottery sherds covered the entire mound. They were composed of various fabrics and very rich in decoration, mainly dotted lines, incised finger nails, dots and other geometric patterns.

The decoration of El-Kawa pottery resembles that of the C-Group and Pre-Kerma, as well as Kassala pottery. Beside the pottery sherds numerous animal, fish bones and molluscs could be found in most of El-Kawa's twelve sites. A common feature is a distinguishable red ware so far unknown outside the White Nile area, except at Kassala.

Aba Island

Aba, the largest island on the White Nile and the private property of the El-Mahdi's family, is nearly if not totally closed to officials. It was visited for the first time by the Antiquities Service when a school teacher from Hilat El-Rahmanyiah informed the Service about finding a human skeleton associated with a quantity of ostrich egg-shell beads, while preparing to install water-pipes in his house.

Hilat El-Rahmanyiah is situated on a slope of a huge ancient mound. The walls of the recent houses contain many pottery sherds, fragments of bones and snail shells. In some trenches dug along the streets for newly introduced main water-pipes partial skeletons and fragments of human bones could be seen in clear greyish archaeological layer. Here also it seems that the cemetery is located at a lower level than the settlement. The pottery found at the site is very similar to the brushed ware of El-Kawa.

Fengoga

The site of Fengoga lies on the left side of the Kenana Sugar Company road, about three kilometres south of the junction with the Sennar - Rabak asphalt. The site bears the name of the recent village on it; is a large low mound - the only one to be seen in this area on the black clay of the Gezira. The density of

the pottery sherds and the existence of human bones, point to a large settlement in association with a cemetery. The pottery is recognizably similar to those of El-Kawa sites.

West Bank

Unlike the Gezira, the west side of the White Nile is composed of an alluvial mud strip extending along the river. To the west is a low sandy ridge, part of the Umm Ruwaba Series that consist of accumulation of unconsolidated sands and gravels. Along the road between Kosti and El-Dueim, several sites were checked. The most remarkable are at Qoz Kubi and Rawdat.

The archaeological mounds of El-Mukhtar are located on sand dunes like all minor ones. All of these sites yield eroded pottery sherds of a red ware, decorated in rocker and incised dot techniques. Shells, but not human or animal bones were observed on the surface. Only two sites were registered in direct connection with the river bank; a site at Quli, just north of Kosti and another at El-Kireda, west of El-Kawa. This second site seems to be an extension to site nos. 5, 9 and 10 near Hilat Saeed (see F. Geus 1984) as the pottery appear to be the same on both sides of the river.

The last point in our inspection was Umm Jer Island, from which a school teacher brought some fossilised bones. Unfortunately we failed to find the teacher and in consequence the site he found.

Conclusion

The White Nile area was without doubt a major cultural zone from early prehistoric times. El-Geteina, El-Dueim and El-Kawa obviously can be identified as important cultural centres requiring more attention.

Although the eastern bank of the river is relatively well known, the west bank yields more archaeological sites of great interest and quite probably earlier date. Noteworthy is, that no wavy-line decorated nor wheel made pottery was observed on both sides of the river in the inspected area.

Dating the sites mentioned above would be very difficult without proper excavation and further study of the archaeological materials. Nevertheless, due to the collected materials, their classification and comparison with Pre-Kerma and Kassala pottery, a late Neolithic date would be quite a reasonable assumption.

The White Nile region remains an unstudied area. A great deal of archaeological data has been lost forever through different activities undertaken by indifferent authorities and the damage continues at a rapid rate. Such an area which could be a significant key to better understanding of unsolved problems in the history of the Sudan, deserves serious treatment.

Acknowledgements

The material mentioned above in this paper had been examined by Ch. Bonnet, I. Caneva and R. Fattovitch, in 1984. The relative date suggested in the

conclusion was due to discussions held with the above named experts. The text was proof read by Dr. Jacqueline Phillips.

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