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## Pre-pastoral Middle Nile: local developments and Saharan contacts

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The most common feature of the landscape in the Middle Nile Valley is an almost continuous string of small mounds along the banks of the Nile. These hillocks are grouped in irregular concentrations (from about 20 to more than 100) and their size varies considerably; some of them have been almost completely removed by human exploitation. They are the remnants of ancient tumuli cemeteries and probably belong to different cultures, mainly dating from the Meroitic period.

On the east side of the Nile, the tumuli follow the edge of the gravel terrace, along the ancient course of the river. Since the river bank was the most intensively inhabited land in this region in prehistoric times, most of the tumuli were built with the debris of prehistoric sites. For this reason, the area might not seem to be promising for prehistoric research, except for surveying surface monuments, but recent work has proved the opposite: no information could be obtained from the surface, where the archaeological materials have been collected and dispersed several times. Conversely, excavation of pure prehistoric deposits was possible underneath the tumuli and proved that they were better preserved than any others in the region, as they have been protected by a thick cover of earth for many centuries.

During the survey made in 1985 on the east bank north of Khartoum (Fig. 1), twenty one tumuli fields containing Mesolithic deposits were located. They were widely separated and the number, size and location of the original prehistoric sites were not clear. Materials diagnostic for Mesolithic attribution in broad terms were: wavy line and dotted wavy line pottery, microlithic stone tools, stone rings, grinding stones, *etc.* The deposits were considered as a whole in all cases and excavation was undertaken to give information on the extent of the sites.

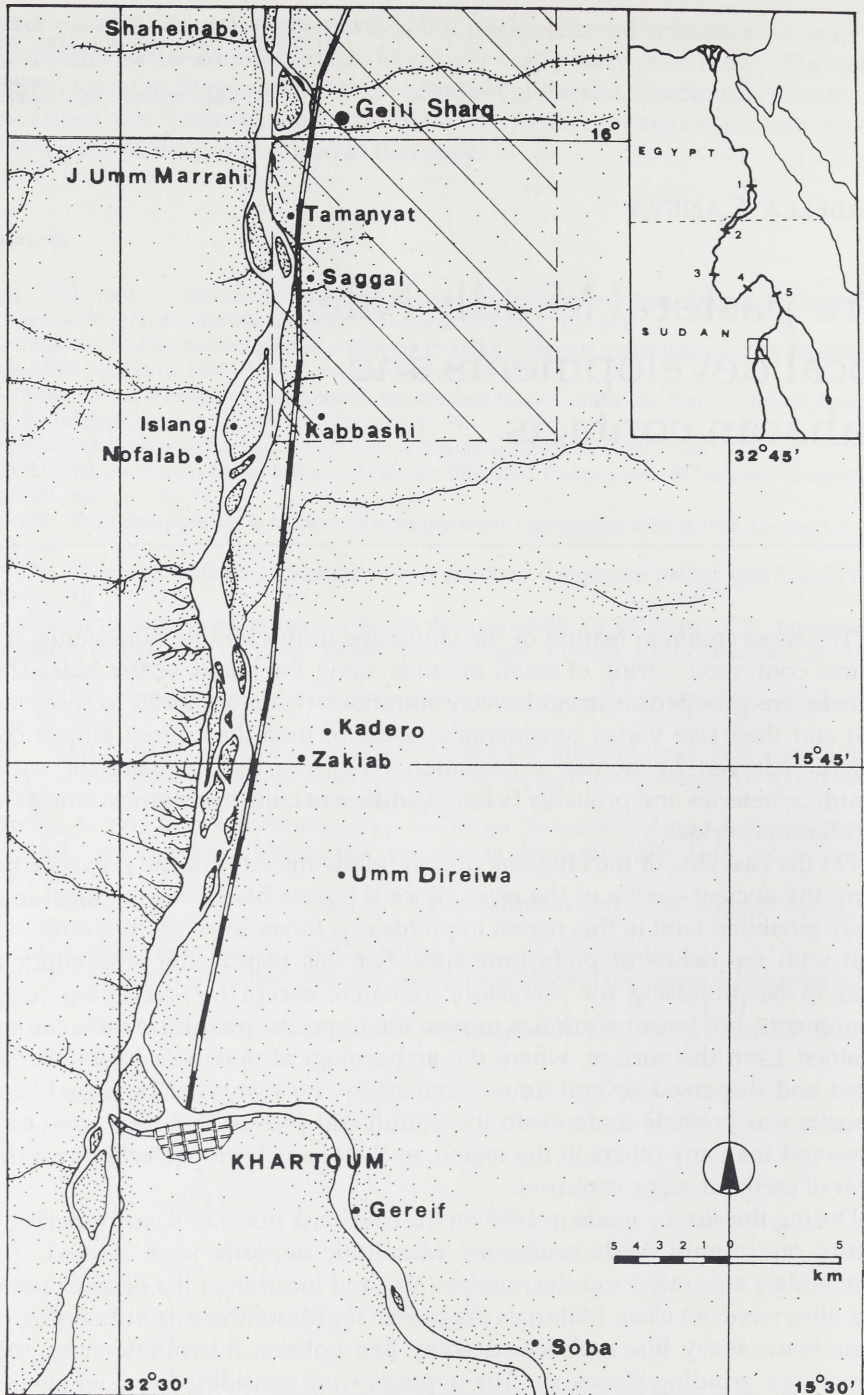


Fig. 1. Map of the Nile Valley north of Khartoum.



Fig. 2. Kabbashi, Sudan. Tumulus B: the wavy line site.

Kabbashi was chosen as a sample and three of the tumuli, located respectively at the eastern and western edge and in the middle of the field, were excavated during two seasons (Caneva 1987). The three earth mounds were dismantled and revealed different original landsurfaces.

Tumulus C, the easternmost mound, was the furthest from the river and was built over the natural, archaeologically sterile, surface of the gravel terrace.

Tumulus B, almost in the middle of the field, was built over a wavy line Mesolithic site which provided the same fine grey ware as Saggai. Remnants of living floors scattered with animal bones and grinding stones were discovered below the ancient surface, which was easily identified (Fig. 2). A Mesolithic burial was also discovered, only marginally touched by the tumulus burial pit. The assemblage is typically dated to the end of the 8th millennium B.P.

Tumulus A, at the westernmost edge of the field, closer to the river, was built over a pure dotted wavy line Mesolithic site, which was radiocarbon dated to the end of the 7th millennium B.P. (Caneva 1988). As expected, the prehistoric debris was still *in situ*, underneath the original tumulus, whereas in the surrounding area it had been removed down to the sterile gravel when the mound was built. Only traces of the Mesolithic deposits were found embedded in the sterile soil outside the perimeter of the tumulus. These traces are now covered by loose materials, which have rolled down the slopes of the mound.

The intact prehistoric site consisted of 45 cm deep deposits, rich in pottery, lithics and faunal remains. A living area was also discovered (Fig. 3). The lithic industry included a small number of lunates and abundant grinding stones. Faunal remains have not been examined yet but seem to include abundant fish and big herbivore bones, and molluscs, like those found at Saggai. A great amount of pottery was found. The ware is reddish-yellow, with rough stone temper. Vessels are globular, with pointed bottoms, and coil-built. Most of the potsherds are decorated with impressed patterns, made exclusively by the rocker technique (Fig. 3); plain wavy line decorations are absent. The most frequent design is the alternating of straight with wavy bands, but designs with several bands of the same type also occur. The same range of motifs, obtained by the same techniques, has been found in many sites in the Sahara, dating to 9,000 - 8,000 B.P. Dotted wavy line pottery has been found almost everywhere in the Sudan, but usually mixed with wavy line pottery, even where a kind of superposition of levels characterized by the two pottery decorations was hypothesized, as at el Qoz (Arkell 1953). Only recently has dotted wavy line pottery been found in pure contexts, lacking wavy line, at Aneibis, in the Atbara region (Haaland 1987a), at Shaqadud, near Shendi (Mohammed Ali, pers. comm.), and at Kabbashi. It is now clear that wavy line and dotted wavy line pottery characterize respectively two distinct aspects of the prehistory of North Africa.

The analogies between the so-called wavy line and the dotted wavy line contexts are impressive: the same environment was selected for settlements; the same subsistence basis, largely relying on aquatic resources; the same kinds of

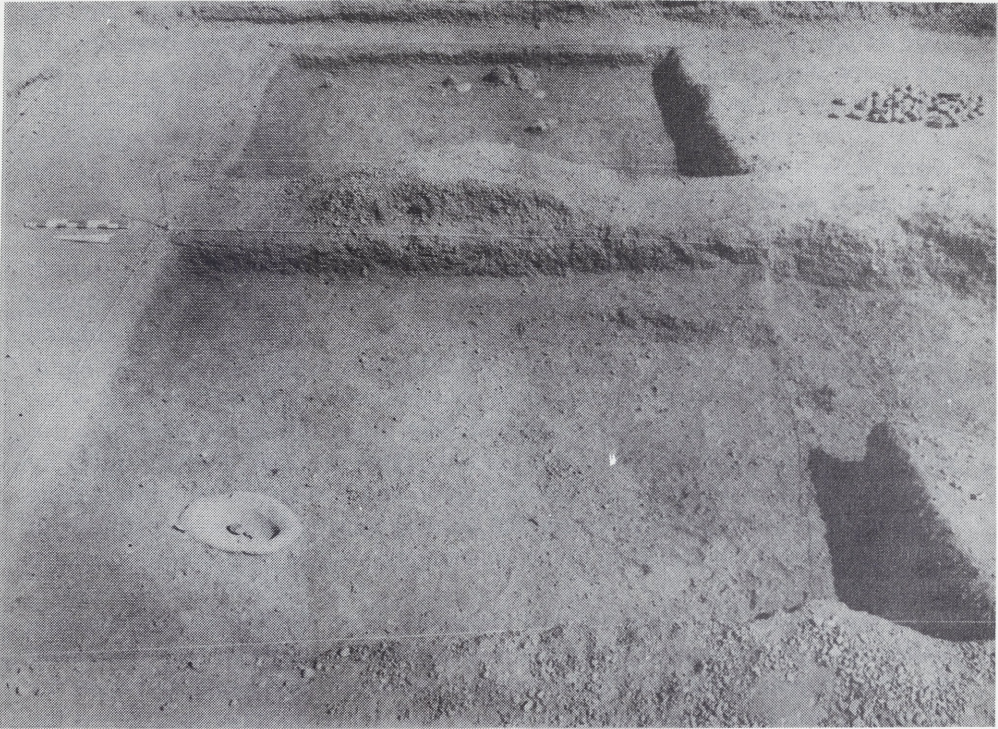


Fig. 3. Kabbashi, Sudan. Tumulus A: the dotted wavy line site.

archaeological materials, especially grinding stones; the presence of burials in the archaeological deposits; the same suggestions of settled life. These analogies, together with several common features of the lithics and pottery, suggest a substantial continuity between the two assemblages. However, pottery decoration, which is the basic difference, is also a diagnostic element: wavy line pottery, abundant in the Nile Valley, is absent in the Sahara, while dotted wavy line pottery occurs there since the 9th millennium B.P., about two millennia before the extensive occurrence of this decoration in the Sudan.

A new series of C-14 dates was obtained in the Khartoum region from the area surveyed in 1985 (Caneva 1988). Together with those obtained recently for Shaqadud and Sorourab, they now provide quite a reliable chronological sequence for the central Nile Valley, which seems to be paralleled in the Atbara Basin, although with slightly earlier dates (Haaland 1987b). These regions seem to have been inhabited, during the 8th millennium B.P. by hunter-fishermen producing wavy line pottery; during the 7th millennium by similar hunter-fishermen producing dotted wavy line pottery; and during the 6th millennium by pastoral people with burnished pottery. The greatest change is traditionally seen during the 6th millennium, when the subsistence basis changes from hunting to herding. Elements for this change, however, must be searched for in the cultures of the 7th millennium and may be expected to explain the mechanisms of development and the ways of diffusion of animal domestication into the Nile Valley. It is now clear that a strong influence from the Sahara developed in the Sudan during the 7th millennium B.P. and not before, slowly replacing the old traditions at least as far as pottery is concerned. It is hard to say whether this is due to migration of people towards the Nile Valley or to an intensified network of exchange, involving also a wider circulation of women, who are the traditional potters. Migration, however, might be excluded due to the observed continuity between these cultures and to a number of differences between the Saharan and the Sudanese dotted wavy line sites. Although some evidence of contacts still exists (e.g. at Shaqadud), during the following periods both the Sudan and the Sahara further west show independent cultural developments associated with the full adoption of pastoralism. It is apparently contradictory that there are more contacts between these two areas when a semi-permanent way of life is attested than when this is replaced by a pastoral, more nomadic, life-style. It is possible, however, that pastoral mobility was very local, with cycles of limited extent, and that territorial borders were more marked in the pastoral than in the hunting societies; the greater fluidity of hunter's groups is likely to have encouraged wider and more intensive changes.

In conclusion, any great cultural expansion from the Sahara into the Nile Valley seems to be limited to the 7th millennium B.P. and was associated with the latest hunter-gatherers. This expansion, therefore, dated slightly before the advent of animal domestication in Africa, and seems to have established the extensive network which later allowed the diffusion of the new economy.

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