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The Gash Group of the Eastern Sudan: an outline

Definition

The Gash Group is a cultural unit typical of the Eastern Sudan, dating from the early third to the mid-second millennium B.C. It corresponds to the middle Kassala Phase of the cultural sequence made evident in the Kassala-Khashm el Girba region (Fattovich, Marks and Ali 1984; Fattovich, Piperno 1986; Marks, Ali and Fattovich 1986; Marks, Fattovich 1989; Fattovich 1990; 1991; Sadr 1988).

So far, 32 Gash Group sites have been recorded along the Gash Delta (Kassala Province) and in the alluvial plains to the south of it. They are located near Eriba Station in the northern delta (ES 1), around the Jebel Taka at the southern end of the delta (K 1, K 2, K 4), along the palaeochannel of Shurab et Gash, about 35 km to the south of Kassala (JAG 1, JE 2, AG 1, AG 2, EG 1, EG 4, SEG 2, SEG 7, SEG 10, SEG 14, SEG 16, SEG 19, SEG 20, SEG 21, SEG 22, SEG 37, EG 39, SEG 51, SEG 55, SEG 56, SEG 59, SEG 64, SEG 65, SEG 66, K 7) and in the steppe to the west of Shurab et Gash (KG 52, KG 53, KG 93) (Sadr 1986, 1988).

The main site of this group is Mahal Teglinos (K 1), located in a natural basin at the northern end of Jebel Taka, near Kassala (Fattovich, Piperno 1986; Costantini *et al.* 1982; 1983; Coltorti *et al.* 1984; Cermaschi *et al.* 1986; Fattovich, Vitagliano 1987a; 1987b).

The occupation sites at Agordat, in the middle Baraka valley, can be also related to this Group (Arkell 1954; Fattovich 1989a). Moreover, some materials from Erkowit in the Red Sea Hills might be compared to those from Mahal Teglinos (Callow, Wahida 1981).

The Gash Group is identified by a ceramic assemblage dominated by scraped vessels (up to 75% of the decorated sherds in the upper levels at Mahal Teglinos; d'Alessandro 1985). The rest of the ceramics are mostly decorated with various rim band designs: simple dash rouletted, punctate zoned and horizontal zig-zag patterns. It exhibits some affinities with the Kerma and C-Group ware. In the

uppermost levels at Mahal Teglinos, moreover, a wide rim band of horizontal parallel incisions, sometimes zoned with punctations is quite frequent (d'Alessandro 1985; Fattovich 1988; Sadr 1988).

The preliminary analysis of the flaked stone industry from Mahal Teglinos indicated that it is basically microlithic, with a practically insignificant blade index. Sometimes, the debitage shows the traces of "secondary" working: new flakes were obtained from other flakes, striking them with different orientations according to the thickness and surface size of the piece; this technique can be observed on flakes and chips. Among the flakes, primary flakes and those with partial cortical surface (sometimes obtained from hammer-stones, upper grinding stones and pestles) are more frequent than those without cortex. Some evidence of bipolar percussion and percussion on anvil can be recognized. The scaled pieces are another typical element of the debitage. Typical tools of this industry are end- and sidescrapers, denticulates, notches, rare burins, truncations, retouched flakes, perforators, very rare *mèches-de forêt* (microlithic or not), backed pieces and geometrics (crescents, and in minor quantities triangles and trapezoidal pieces). The geometrics are obtained mainly from flakes without the use of the microburin technique. The raw materials include quartz, agate, and in minor amounts flint, basalt, chert, greenstone and jasper (Fattovich, Vitagliano 1987b).

Polished and ground stone artefacts are quite common at Mahal Teglinos. They include fragments of lower grinding stones, upper grinding stones, hammerstones, pestles and abraders, usually made of local granite and basalt. Polished axes of basalt and sometimes of more valuable stone also occur (Fattovich, Vitagliano 1987b).

The minor artefact classes include lip-pluges, lip and/or nose-studs, stone, shell and ostrich beads and pendants, bone pins, anthropomorphic and animal figurines, miniaturized pots and other small objects.

Another recently discovered aspect of the Gash Group is the use of monolithic stelae to indicate the burial ground at Mahal Teglinos (Cremaschi *et al.* 1986; Fattovich, Vitagliano 1987a). About 60 stelae have been found so far. They are *ca.* 0.90 - 1 m high and can be distinguished into three main types: pointed stones, flat stones, small pillars. The burials associated with these monuments were not directly connected to the single stelae, suggesting that they indicated the funerary meaning of the area, rather than single graves (Fattovich 1991).

The following main types of burials have been identified:

1. Body lying on the back, legs bent on the left side, head to the west, face to the north, arms straight or flexed;
2. Contracted body on the right side, head to the west, face to the north, hands in front of the face, legs strongly bent;
3. Contracted body on the right or left side, head to the west or the east, arms flexed;
4. Body lying on the right side, head to the west, legs slightly flexed, right arm straight, left arm flexed;

5. Body lying on the back, head to the west, legs straight, right arm straight, left arm flexed;

6. Body lying in a straight posture on the frontal side, with the left arm flexed and the hand in front of the face, the right arm slightly flexed and the hand below the pelvis, legs with feet crossed.

No grave good have been found, save for some personal ornaments (Fattovich 1989a).

The excavation at Mahal Teglinos have made evident a stratigraphical sequence with five main archaeological levels, representing different stages of development of the Gash Group. They correspond to eight main phases of occupation of the site in this period (Coltorti *et al.* 1984; d'Alessandro 1985; Fattovich, Vitagliano 1987b). The upper levels I - IV can be ascribed to the typical Gash Group. Level V can be attributed either to a marginal facies of the Butana Group, identified in the Khashm et Girba area, or to a possible proto-Gash Group.

Level I includes scraped ware, with indented, pinched and direct rims, sometimes decorated with clay balls applied to the shoulder of the pots; linear carved or combed ware; straight line incised ware; simple dash roulette rim banded ware, with linear or wavy vertical impressions; black topped ware; black polished ware; red polished ware; stick red burnished ware.

Level II includes scraped ware, with direct, indented and pinched rims; simple dash roulette rim banded ware, with vertical wavy impressions; linear carved or combed ware; black topped ware; red polished ware; stick red burnished ware.

Level III is characterized by a fine pottery, often with a biotite black slip on the inside. It includes fine scraped ware, with direct and indented rims; fine ware decorated with rim bands of oblique engravings; black polished and red polished wares; black-topped ware.

Level IV includes scraped ware with direct rims; wiped ware; black-topped ware; black polished and red polished ware; stick red burnished ware.

Level V is characterized by a high frequency of undecorated ware. On the basis of the fabrics, two sub-levels can be distinguished. Level Va includes black-topped ware; black polished ware; stick red or black burnished ware; scraped ware; zig-zag rim banded ware. Level Vb includes black polished ware; stick red burnished ware; scraped ware; wiped ware.

On the basis of the cross-dating with the Kerma and C-Group pottery in Nubia and four radiocarbon datings from charcoal samples from the stratigraphical sequence in the trench K 1 BSKP/1987 (Fattovich, Sadr and Vitagliano 1988), the archaeological levels at Mahal Teglinos can be dated as follows:

Level I: 1,500/1,550 - 1,790/1,820 B.C.

Level II: 1,790/1,820 - 1,870/1,920 B.C.

Level III: 1,870/1,920 - 2,300 B.C.

Level IV: 2,300 - 2,500/2,510 B.C.

Level Va: 2,500/2,510 - 2,700/2,730 B.C.

Level Vb: 2,700/2,730 - 2,950/3,010 B.C.

In turn, the stelae can be mainly correlated to the level II and possibly III, suggesting a date to the early 2nd millennium B.C. (Fattovich 1989a).

Natural background

The reconstruction of the Gash Delta palaeoenvironment during the Holocene is still largely speculative. The available evidence suggests that the climatic fluctuations in this region followed the general trend outlined in the other regions of Northern Africa and the Horn (Marks, Sadr 1988; Sadr 1988; Fattovich, Sadr and Vitagliano 1988; Fattovich 1990). Therefore, we can assume that in the 3rd - 2nd millennia B.C. the climate of the region was wetter than to-day and the landscape was dominated by the deciduous savanna woodland.

However, at the regional level, the local hydrology was a more important environmental factor. In fact, the Holocene geomorphological history of the Kassala region was characterized by the slow northeasterly movement of the Gash Delta, from a possible Terminal Pleistocene/Early Holocene confluence into the Atbara river to the present bed (Durante *et al.* 1980; Coltorti *et al.* 1984; Marks, Sadr 1988). Between *ca.* 3,000 - 2,000 B.C. the river flowed most likely along the Shurab el Gash palaeo-channel. By around 2,000 B.C. it assumed its present course, as we can infer from the stratigraphic position of the appearance of riverine and aquatic fauna at Mahal Teglinos (Sadr 1988).

Another important environmental factor was the availability of natural resources particularly appreciated in ancient times, in the hinterland of Kassala: frankincense, other resins and gums, gold, ivory and ebony (Fattovich, Sadr and Vitagliano 1988).

Settlement pattern

The Gash Group sites range in size between less than 0.5 and 12 hectares. At present, five main hierarchical levels can be distinguished in the southern Gash Delta (Sadr 1988; Fattovich, Sadr and Vitagliano 1988):

- 13 sites with surface inferior to 1 hectare;
- 5 sites with surface between 1 and 2 hectares;
- 5 sites with surface between 2.5/3 and 4 hectares;
- 3 sites with surface between 6.5/7 and 8.5 hectares;
- 2 sites with surface of 10/11 - 12 hectares.

On the basis of the size, density of materials and thickness of the archaeological deposit they can be regarded as permanent villages or periodically reoccupied settlements over a long time, semipermanent settlements and temporary camps.

Subsistence economy

At the present stage of the research, we can suggest that the subsistence economy of the Gash Group people relied on cattle and sheep/goats breeding and most likely on plant cultivation (Marks, Sadr 1988; Fattovich, Sadr and Vitagliano 1988).

Domestic cattle and sheep/goats appeared at Mahal Teglinos in the early typical Gash Group layers, dating to *ca.* 2,500 - 2,000 B.C. (Geraads 1983). The occurrence of many lower and upper grinding stones in most assemblages of this group, and the size of the major sites, in turn, confirms that cultivation of domestic plants was practiced (Fattovich, Vitagliano 1987a; 1987b, Sadr 1988).

The settlement pattern, moreover, point to a location of the major sites in the optimal zones, and of the semipermanent and temporary camps in the marginal ones, suggesting a heavy reliance on pastoral production (Sadr 1988). It is interesting to remark that this pattern can be compared with that of the modern semi-nomadic Beni Amer of the northern Ethiopian-Sudanese borderland (see Fattovich, Sadr and Vitagliano 1988).

Craft activity

The evidence from Mahal Teglinos suggests that different craft activities were carried on at this site: the making of pottery; the working of flaked tools and ground stones, including axes; the manufacture of lip-plugs and studs, and discoidal beads, mainly of ostrich shell (Fattovich, Sadr and Vitagliano 1988).

Trade and external contacts

The available evidence suggests that the Gash Group people were included in a complex network of contacts and exchanges which linked Egypt and the Middle Nile Valley to the Upper Nile, the Horn and possibly Southern Arabia (Fattovich 1988; Fattovich, Sadr and Vitagliano 1988). Such contacts seem to have been particularly frequent in the first half of the 2nd millennium B.C.

The occurrence of Kerma elements along the whole stratigraphical sequence at Mahal Teglinos documents the continuity of contacts with this early stage during the whole period of development of the Gash Group (Coltorti *et al.* 1984; Fattovich, Vitagliano 1987a; 1987b; Fattovich 1988; 1989a).

Coiled and finger-nail impressed sherds, like specimens from Shaqadud Cave in the Northern Butana going back to the late 3rd - early 2nd millennium B.C., appear in the levels I, II and upper III (*ca.* 2,000 - 1,500 B.C.). Fragments of Jebel Moya type occur in the level I (*ca.* 1,800 - 1,500 B.C.). Fragments like the Terminal C-Group and Pan Grave ones occur in the Terminal Gash Group level overlapping the burial ground (*ca.* 1,600/1,500 - 1,400 B.C.; Cremaschi *et al.* 1986; Fattovich, Vitagliano 1987a; Fattovich 1989a). An Egyptian sherd of New Kingdom type has been collected in the upper level I (*ca.* 1,500 B.C.). Obsidian flakes of probable Ethiopian origin occur in the level I (*ca.* 1,800 - 1,500 B.C.). A fragment with wavy punctate decoration along the rim, comparable to specimens from Northern Yemen going back to the 3rd - 2nd millennium B.C., has been found in the level IV (*ca.* 2,500 - 2,300 B.C.). Red stick burnished sherds, like those from Mahal Teglinos, in turn, have been found in sites along the

Yemeni Tihama, going back to the 3rd - 2nd millennium B.C. (Tosi, pers. comm.). Finally, sherds like those from the Gash Group assemblages at Agordat have been collected at Subr, near Aden, in the Southern Yemen (Lankester Harding 1964).

On the whole, it seems that the radius of action of the Gash Group covered a very wide area stretching from the White Nile to the Red Sea coast and the cliffs of the Ethiopian plateau (Fattovich, Sadr and Vitagliano 1988). Therefore, the present evidence suggests that in the late 3rd - early 2nd millennium B.C. Mahal Teglinos was a node in the commercial routes connecting the Middle Nile and the Gezira to the Red Sea coast and the Ethiopian highlands. To this commercial activity we can relate most likely the occurrence of donkey remains in the levels I - II at Mahal Teglinos.

Social complexity

The clear cut hierarchy in size and wealth of the Gash Group sites suggests a social and economic complexity, may be at the chiefdom level of organization (Sadr 1988).

It is confirmed by the discovery of some administration devices at Mahal Teglinos (Fattovich, Sadr and Vitagliano 1988). They are:

8 stamp clay seals from the levels I and IV (*ca.* 1,800 - 1,500 B.C.; 2,500 - 2,300 B.C.);

2 tokens from the levels I and III (*ca.* 1,800 - 1,500 B.C.; 2,300 - 1,900 B.C.);

1 fragment of clay sealing from the upper level III (*ca.* 2,000 B.C.).

Two stamp clay seals have also been collected at the sites IAG 1 and SEG 19, suggesting an articulated administrative organization.

In turn, the creation of a formal burial ground marked with stelae at Mahal Teglinos might be related to the emergence of territorial descent groups with privileged access to some economic resources in time of scarcity, as Chapman (1981) has suggested for the European megaliths.

Processual analysis

The following process of socio-economic and cultural transformations, reflected by the Gash Group evidence, can be provisionally outlined:

Proto-Gash Group (*ca.* 3,000 - 2,500 B.C.)

The origins of the Gash Group are not yet perfectly understood. However, the available evidence suggests some degree of cultural continuity between it and the previous Butana Group located to the east of the Atbara along an Early to Middle Holocene palaeochannel of the Gash (Marks, Sadr 1988; Sadr 1988). It seems that in the first half of the 3rd millennium B.C., the region around Kassala was only marginally occupied by the Butana people (Fattovich, Sadr and

Vitagliano 1988). In any case, the thickness of the deposit (*ca.* 80 cm) in the level V at Mahal Teglinos might suggest a more stable occupation of this site than in a seasonal camp (Fattovich, Vitagliano 1987b). At this time, the subsistence economy of the people living in the southern Gash Delta relied on the hunting of wild species (Geraads 1983).

Early Gash Phase (*ca.* 2,500 - 2,000 B.C.)

In the mid-3rd millennium B.C. the people of the Butana Group apparently moved eastwards, following the shift of the Gash course, and settled mainly along the palaeochannel at Shurab el Gash (Sadr 1988). At the same time it was affected by some changes in the material culture, mainly due to the contacts with Kerma, emerging as the typical Gash Group culture (Fattovich 1988).

A stable village (SEG 56) 8.5 hectares in size, appears along the Middle Holocene system of Gash channels at Shurab el Gash. It may be regarded as a transitional Butana/Gash site (Sadr 1988). At the same time, another permanent village arose at Mahal Teglinos (Fattovich, Vitagliano 1987b). The earliest funerary stelae discovered so far, most likely go back to this period (Fattovich 1989a), suggesting that this site was a ceremonial center connected to the cult of the dead. Moreover, a large site (ES 1), *ca.* 10 hectares in size, appear near Eriba Station in the northern delta, about 140 km from Kassala, confirming that the Gash people spread also to the north towards the Red Sea Hills (Fattovich 1989b). The subsistence economy relied mainly on the cattle and sheep/goats breeding, but the hunting and gathering of wild forms represented an important component (Costantini *et al.* 1982; Geraads 1983). Cultivation was probably practiced, but actual evidence is still lacking.

At this time, the Gash people were certainly in contact with those of the Middle Nile Valley, as we can infer from the Early Kerma and C-Group elements occurring at ES 1 and Mahal Teglinos. The evidence of administrative devices in the levels IV and III at Mahal Teglinos suggests that a "chiefdom" arose in this period.

Classic Gash Group (*ca.* 2,000 - 1,500 B.C.)

In this phase the Shurab et Gash area was densely populated by Gash Group people. One or perhaps two main residential villages arose in this area (JAG 1, SEG 7/SEG 14). They were surrounded by a complex system of semipermanent villages and temporary households or camps, more directly connected to the subsistence activities (Sadr 1988). At the same time, Mahal Teglinos was occupied by a large residential village, about 10 - 11 hectares in size, mainly involved in craft and trade activities (Fattovich, Sadr and Vitagliano 1988). Moreover, in this period the Gash Group people most likely spread to the east and north, as far as the Red Sea coast, occupying the whole northern Ethiopian-Sudanese borderland. This can be inferred from the evidence at Agordat, Erkowit and Aqiq (Fattovich 1990).

Husbandry and cultivation were surely practiced and in particular, the dispersal of the settlements into more marginal lands in the southern Gash might suggest a shift in the subsistence economy to a more specialized agro-pastoral production strategy (Sadr 1988). At this time, the Gash Group people were included in the large circuit of economic interchange gradually evolving between the peoples of Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia and perhaps Somalia and Southern Arabia. In particular, Mahal Teglinos probably became a basic node in the commercial routes connecting the Ethiopian highlands to the Red Sea coast, the Gezira and the middle Nile Valley. It might have been the gateway to the Land of Punt, maintained in the Pharaonic sources (Fattovich 1991). The social organization was most likely at the "chiefdom" level.

Terminal Gash Phase (ca. 1,500 - 1,400 B.C.)

This phase is still poorly documented. The scarce evidence from Mahal Teglinos suggests that at this time there were contacts with the Late C-Group and Pan-Grave peoples of Nubia and Eastern Desert (Cremaschi *et al.* 1986; Fattovich, Vitagliano 1987a; Fattovich 1991).

The major sites continued to be occupied, but apparently they reduced in size, suggesting a more marginal position for the Gash Delta within the trading circuits of the Nile Valley and the Horn. At this time, northern peoples related to the Pan-Grave Culture probably penetrated into the borderland and mixed with the Gash Group (Sadr 1987; 1988; Fattovich, Sadr and Vitagliano 1988).

Conclusions

The Gash Group represents the first evidence of a possible chiefdom to the south of Nubia in protohistorical times and environmental, economic and political factors were most likely involved in its development.

The northeastwards progressive shift of the Gash Delta, from its original confluence with the Atbara to the present course, in the Middle Holocene opened a new region favorable to the human settlement and caused the northwards movement of the Butana Group people from the Atbara to Shurab et Gash and Jebel Taka. At the same time it shortened the route from the middle Nile Valley to Northern Ethiopia and the southern Red Sea coast, more directly involving the local peoples in contacts with Nubia. In such a way the Gash Delta became the land gateway to the resources of the Eritrean western lowlands and Tigrean plateau.

With the inclusion of the Gash people in the circuit of interchange between Egypt and the southern regions of North-eastern Africa, it became an important commercial partner of the Kerma state. Such trade activity, in turn, caused the rise of a quite complex society, most likely at the chiefdom level, in the region.

The rise of a chiefdom probably affected the increase of the population and the shift towards a more specialized agro-pastoral economic strategy in the

Classic Gash Group. The Egyptian dominion of Nubia in the New Kingdom finally weakened the role of Kerma as an intermediary in the trade with the South, isolating the Gash Delta more and more from the main trading flow, as we can infer from the impoverishment of the final Gash Group occupation at Mahal Teglinos. Such isolation might have been increased moreover by the start of the direct South Arabian trade of frankincense in the 15th century B.C. (Fattovich 1991). However, the contacts with the Nile Valley were not completely interrupted, the nomads of the Eastern Desert probably acting as intermediaries (Saleh 1973).

At the end, the Gash people mixed with northern groups, originating the Jebel Mokram Group, which represented the following stage of socio-economic and cultural development in the region (Fattovich, Sadr and Vitagliano 1988).

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