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The Early A-Group in Upper Lower Nubia, Upper Egypt and the surrounding deserts

Introduction

The Nubian A-Group is mainly known from evidence belonging to its Middle and Terminal phase (Nordström 1972). On the contrary, the Early A-Group phase for many reasons, including the splitting up and consequently virtual disappearing of the material within too many unreported museum collections (De Simone per. comm.), is still quite unknown. According to the current knowledge, sites related to the A-Group are located along the Nile Valley (Fig. 1) from Aswan north¹ to the Batn el Hagggar, south of the Second Cataract (Nordström 1972). The Early sites however, are recorded only between the First Cataract and the Dakka-Sayala area (Smith 1991).

In previous works I suggested (Gatto 1997, 2000) that only the evidence found at the Dakka-Sayala are to be connected with an Early A-Group presence, while those from the First Cataract should be related to a Naqadian settlement. The percentages of Egyptian and Nubian materials in the two regions differ completely and the Nubian component makes up the majority only at Dakka-Sayala sites. This point of view have been accepted by the few scholars who are dealing with the A-Group (Nordström per. comm.; Lange per. comm.).

In the last few years research in Upper Egypt and the surrounding deserts, searching for Nubian evidence in these areas, has been increased (Gatto 2003, 2005), and what I am now suggesting is that there is another, almost unknown, local Early A-Group variant north of Lower Nubia. In fact, unique cultural fea-

¹ The cemetery of Sheikh Mohammed is known in the literature as Kubbaniya South (Junker 1919). In reality, it is located midway between Aswan and Kubbaniya and, because a connection with the Aswan area seems to me more likely, I prefer to call it Sheikh Mohammed instead of Kubbaniya South.

tures, unknown elsewhere, have been recorded in the area surrounding the First Cataract, and from there northward up to Hierakonpolis and probably even Arment. They may indicate the presence of a regional variant of a culture combining, during the first half of the fourth millennium BC, both Egyptian and Nubian traditions.

Starting from this point, I will be here summarize what is known, up to now, of the Early A-Group and where Early A-Group or Early A-Group related evidence can be found.

The archaeological record from the Dakka-Sayala area

The knowledge on the Early A-Group is mainly based on the material culture coming from cemeteries located along the Nile Valley from Gerf Hussein to Mediq (Firth 1912, 1915, 1927). The few settlements found are still unpublished. This is the area where the Wadi Allaqi reaches the Nile forming the wide Dakka Plain. Some 15 cemeteries, out of the 35 related to the A-Group culture, can be dated to this early phase. However, because most of the Early A-Group graves are very badly preserved, for example at cemetery 73 the bodies are lying directly on the sand (Firth 1912: 98), it seems originally there were more graves than those recorded. As already proved by Smith (1966), at the beginning most of the Early A-Group graves were incorrectly assigned to the B-Group.

There are no radiocarbon dates available for this phase. Therefore, it seems the only possibility is to date the sites using the Naqadian artifacts found inside the graves. Unfortunately, the majority of the Early A-Group graves lack the presence of Naqadian artifacts, so their attribution is not so easy and must be made mainly using the typical Early A-Group ceramic productions. For the same reason, the reconnaissance of a pre- Early A-Group phase is very difficult.

Following Hendrickx' chronology for the Predynastic period (Hendrickx 1996), the Early A-Group should be dated between 3800 and 3500 BC, corresponding to Kaiser Stufen Ic-IIc (Kaiser 1957). Two different stages of it have been noticed: stage I dated to NIc-NIIa and stage II dated to NIIb-c (Gatto 200). Variations within the material culture of the two stages can be detected, particularly in the pottery production and in the grave typology. Unfortunately, the current state of research does not provide further, detailed, information.

The small Cemetery 103 in the Dakka Plain (Fig. 1) can be viewed as an Early A-Group type site, because it has graves belonging only to this phase. Other important cemeteries, for their state of preservation, are Cemetery 76, 79, 102 (Firth 1912, 1915).

Most of the Early A-Group grave shafts are circular in shape, often with a bee-hive section, and plastered internally. Few examples of rectangular shafts

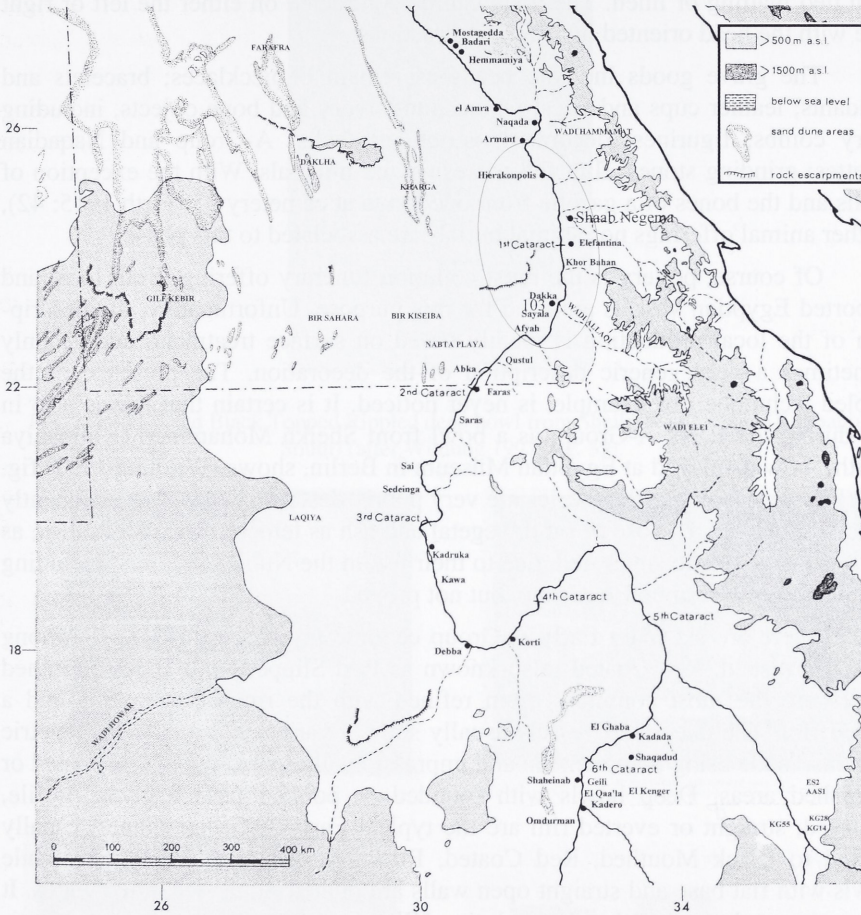


Fig. 1. Map of the Nile Valley showing the geographical distribution of the Early A-Group evidence, with location of cemetery 103 and Shaab Negema tumulus (adapted after Nordström 1972: PL. I).

with rounded corners, and in rare cases a side chamber, have been noted as well, but seem to be mostly related to the second stage of the phase. Sometimes stone slabs covering the shaft are still in place. At Cemetery 77 the graves are covered with rubble domes, similar in structure to the Terminal A-Group grave from Tunqala West (Firth 1912: figs. 92 and 94; Trigger 1965: fig. 6).

Single graves are the most common but some multiple burials occur as well. Usually the body is laid on or covered with leather and only sometimes with tied matting or linen. The body can be contracted on either the left or right side with the head oriented in different directions.

The grave goods include: beads as remain of necklaces; bracelets and pendants; leather cups and bags; feather fans; ivory and bone objects, including ivory combs; figurines; decorated ostrich eggshells; A-Group and Naqadian palettes; grinding stones; flint flakes; resins and minerals. With the exception of shells and the bones of a gazelle from one grave at cemetery 95 (Firth 1915: 42), neither animal offerings nor animal burials are associated to this phase.

Of course, pottery is the most common funerary offering. Both local and imported Egyptian vessels are used for this purpose. Unfortunately, the description of the local production is mainly based on surface treatment, adding only sometimes a very generic description of the decoration. The presence of the rippled technique, for example, is never noticed. It is certain that it was also in use during the Early A-Group, as a bowl from Sheikh Mohammed (Kubbaniya South), now displayed at Egyptian Museum in Berlin, shows (Wildung 1997: fig. 39) (Fig. 2). Moreover the fabrics are very poorly described and are consequently almost unknown. The use of sand, vegetal and ash as tempering in the fabrics, as well as dung, can be suggested, due to their use in the Nubian cultures, including the Middle and Terminal A-Group, but not proved.

There are six main Early A-Group ceramic productions (Fig. 3). Among them Burnished, Red Coated (also known as Red Slipped) and Black Mouthed Wares are the most common, often refined with the rippled technique and a milled rim. The decorated vessels usually show a variety of complex geometric patterns, made using both incision and impression, alternated with plain coated or burnished areas. Deep bowls with rounded or pointed base, convex profile, incurved, straight or everted rim are the typical Early A-Group shapes, usually related to Black Mouthed, Red Coated, Burnished and Rippled wares; while bowls with flat base and straight open walls are related to the decorated wares. It seems that at the end of the phase, during NIIC, some jars, similar but not identical to the contemporaneous Egyptian R and P jars, were produced. However, the way they are described and represented in the publications do not help to reconstruct their manufacture properly.

Interesting to note is the finding, within the debris of C-Group graves in Cemeteries 98 and 118, of four caliciform beakers (Firth 1915: PL. 27f, 1927: PL. 25a3) (Fig. 4). Of course, their location is not the original one and, even if Cemetery 98 has also A-Group graves, the attribution of such beakers to the A-Group culture is unlikely. On the contrary, they can be seen as evidence of a pre-A-Group occupation in the area. To be remembered, such vessels are typical of

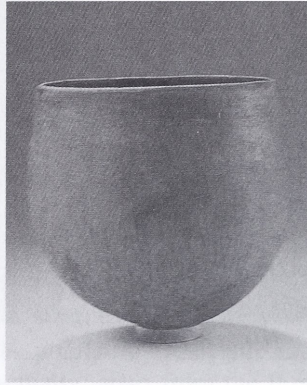
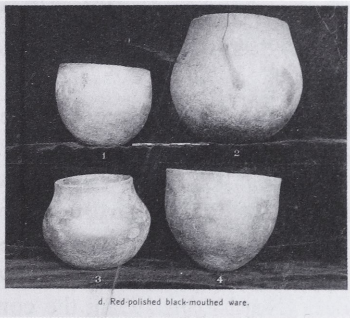
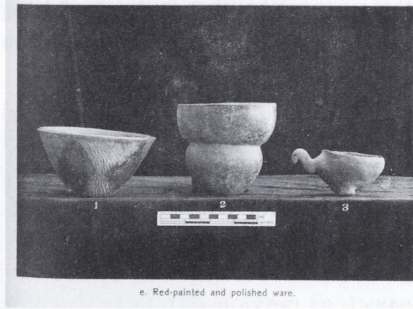


Fig. 2. Red Coated Black Topped Rippled deep bowl from Sheikh Mohammed (Kubbaniya South) (after Wildung 1997: fig. 39).



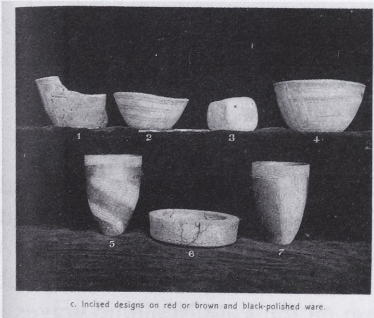
d. Red polished black-mouthed ware.

a



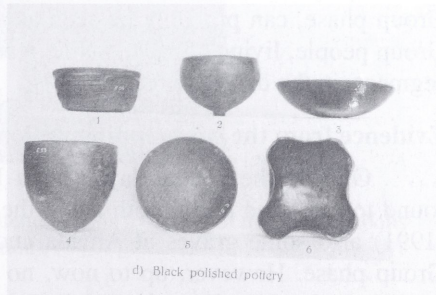
e. Red-painted and polished ware.

b



c. Incised designs on red or brown and black-polished ware.

c



d) Black polished pottery

d

Fig. 3. Early A-Group pottery (after Firth 1915: PL. 27c,d,e, 1927: PL. 20d).

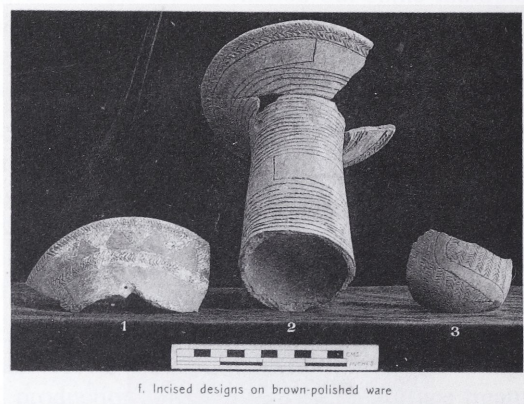


Fig. 4. Beakers from cemeteries 98 and 118 at Dakka (after Firth 1915: PL. 27f, 1927: PL. 25a3).

most of the Neolithic cultures of Egypt and Sudan dated to the fifth millennium BC, all to be included in the Neolithic Nubian tradition, but not of the A-Group (Gatto in press a).

Within the Early A-Group burials in the Dakka-Sayala region those containing Naqadian objects are never the majority: at Cemetery 103 40% of the graves contained Egyptian imports and in few cases, here 11%, some of which almost un plundered, Naqadian objects are the only offering related to the burial. Following this, a stable presence of some Egyptian people, maybe tradesmen, within the A-Group living in the Dakka-Sayala area can be suggested. In this respect, as previously noticed by other scholars (Nordström 1972), the complex of storage pits at Khor Daud (Piotrovski 1967), partially dated to the Early A-Group phase, can probably be seen as a bartering place where Egyptian and A-Group people, living along the Nile, were trading with nomads (or their nomadic segment) in the desert.

Evidence from the surrounding regions

Outside the Dakka-Sayala area Early A-Group evidence can be mostly found towards the north, both along the Nile and in the desert. Following Smith (1991) also some graves at Amada and Masmara can be dated to the Early A-Group phase. However, up to now, no other Early A-Group graves can be observed south of the Korosko bend, also because all the Late Neolithic graves in Sudan and Nubia lack the presence of Egyptian objects, a typical trait in the A-Group funerary assemblage.

Around the First Cataract and south of it, Early A-Group objects, and some graves, are recorded within the Naqadian cemeteries (Junker 1919; Reisner 1910; Smith 1991). This record, again, can be interpreted as the evidence of a scarce, but stable, presence of Nubians in the Egyptian territory. Because of the poor preservation of the graves, our knowledge of the oldest Early A-Group/Naqadian settlement in this region is mainly based on the evidence from Shaikh Mohammed (Kubbaniya South), Shellal and Khor Bahan Cemeteries.

Of course, the Early A-Group material corresponds, in many respect, to that known from Dakka-Sayala, except for the common presence of animal offerings and animal burials, particularly dogs and sheep-goat, in every cemetery. But this may be a Naqadian funerary custom, wrongly attributed to the A-Group, and adopted by them only in this area.

However, it must be pointed out that this is unlikely, as it simply is not that common in Egypt. Actually, apart from the First Cataract evidence, animal offerings and animal burials are commonly recorded only in the Badarian and Maadian cemeteries. Following this, such funerary practice may be a local custom in this First Cataract region stretching up to Hierakonpolis as it is not really a general Egyptian custom. If this funerary custom descends from the Badarian is still questionable but the possibility has to be seriously taken into consideration.



Fig. 5. Hole-mouthed jar from site HK54 at Hierakonpolis (courtesy of the Hierakonpolis Expedition).

Early A-Group or Early A-Group related pottery can be found also in Upper Egypt, in both funerary and settlement contexts (Needler 1984). Decorated and rippled vessels are recorded for example at Naqada, Adaïma, Mamariye,

Elkab and Hierakonpolis (H. De Morgan 1909; Baumgartel 1970; Needler 1984; Buchez and Midant-Reynes 2002). In the latter site, a systematic survey undertaken in 2002 has given more, new, information (Gatto 2003). Here, also “utilitarian” pottery has been found, including Early A-Group jars and some peculiar examples unknown in Nubia. A hole mouth jar (Fig. 5) with a typical Nubian decorated thick rim and an orange coating on a smoothed surface, has a crushed quartz tempered fabric with a large amount of mica in it. This fabric is not recorded in Nubia. Judging from the published description and picture, a deep pot with similar surface treatment and fabric has been found by the Darnells at the Cave of the Wooden Pegs in the desert behind Armant (Darnell 2002: PL. 89). Its attribution to the Badarian Culture is mainly related to its shape, while the fabric appears to be atypical. Following the Hierakonpolis example, a dating to the Early A-Group phase can be suggested and seems to correspond to the one proposed for the main deposit of the Cave, dated to NIc-IIId. Moreover, the Darnells recorded the presence of much Nubian pottery in the deposit, that again should be dated to the Early A-Group phase. This misinterpretation between Badarian and Early A-Group productions has to be pointed out.

At Hierakonpolis also a fine sand and possibly ash tempered fabric has been noticed. This time, similarities can be found with the Final Neolithic ceramic production of the Nabta-Kiseiba area, which are some centuries older than the Hierakonpolis examples (Nelson 2002; Gatto in press b). Moreover, it is interesting to note that the rippled decoration on both surfaces, found at HK64 at Hierakonpolis and at the unpublished site CPE E-00-5 north of Bir Nakhelai in the Western Desert (Fig. 6), is (again) a typical trait of the Badarian production.

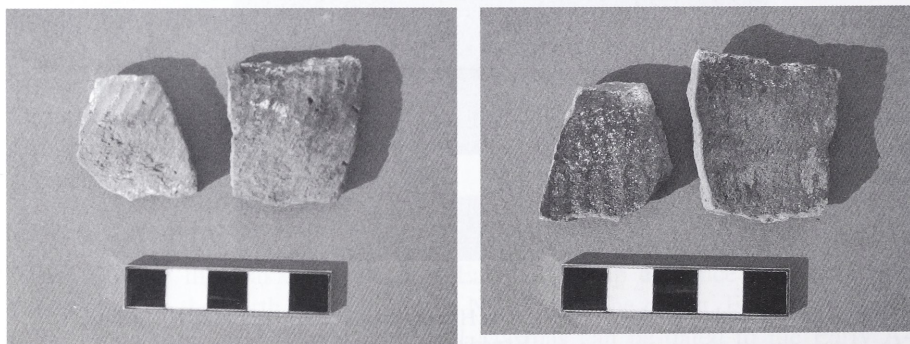


Fig. 6. Examples of Rippled decoration on both surfaces from sites HK64 (Hierakonpolis) and E-00-5 (Bir Nakhelai, Nabta-Kiseiba) (courtesy of the Hierakonpolis Expedition; courtesy of the British Museum).

The Shaab Negema tumulus

In 2005 an isolated stone tumulus was found in the Wadi al Lawi (Fig. 1), the main southern tributary of Wadi Kharit in the desert east of Kom Ombo. It is located in a very small valley, named Shaab Negema, to the west of the main wadi. The tumulus (Fig. 7), measuring approximately 7,5 X 7,5 m, is composed of two different concentric stone rings. A standing stone slab along the internal



Fig. 7. The Shaab Negema tumulus located in the desert east of Kom Ombo.

ring may possibly be interpreted as a stele, but only a systematic investigation can confirm or disprove it. Fifteen sherds belonging to three different pots were found at the surface. One is decorated on both surfaces with a wide rippled impression on a dark brown burnished exterior surface and a black interior (Fig. 8). Thanks to cross-reference with the aforementioned similar evidence along the Nile Valley and in the Western Desert, and to that found in the Kom Ombo plain

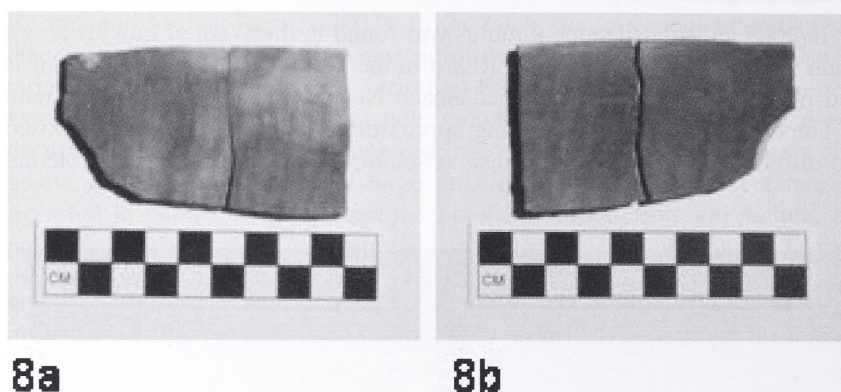


Fig. 8a and b. Rippled decoration on both surfaces from pottery found at Shaab Negema.

by Butzer and Hansen (1968), the grave can be tentatively dated to the late stage of the early A-Group phase (mid-4th millennium BC, N IIa-d). This find may be the only A-Group tumulus known north of Aswan and in the Eastern Desert.

Conclusive remarks

The relationship between the Early A-Group, the Final Neolithic of the Western Desert, and the Badarian already came to light in the recent past (Gatto 2002). All of them are the northernmost regional variants of the Nubian Group, which of course includes also cultures from the south, such as the Abkan, the Neolithic of Kadruka, and the Middle and Terminal A-Group. It is interesting to note that the aforementioned cultures are dated to two different millennia (V and IV millennia BC). However, the data here presented is giving more consistency to the interaction between the Early A-Group from Upper Egypt and the Badarian that really deserves further investigations.

Following this, because of the strong regional variations brought to light, the necessity to change the term A-Group is here suggested again, as it already was some years ago (Gatto and Tiraterra 1996). In fact, we are dealing with different units of the same culture group (as described by Clarke, 1968), which most certainly was present also in the Kerma region, as the affinities with the later Pre-Kerma culture seem to confirm (Honegger 2004). If we confined our definition to the culture group level, not going deeper into the clan/tribe level, it will be very difficult to understand intra-culture variations, so important to define the spatial distribution of the entire culture group, as well as of its single units. Detecting

minimal variations within the same cultural background can be really the key to determine and understand the intra-group dynamics.

Acknowledgments

My appreciation goes to Renée Friedman who in November 2002 gave me the opportunity to spend two weeks in Hierakonpolis searching for prehistoric Nubian evidence. She also revised a first version of this article and correct my English. In addition she gave me the permission to use for this article some of the photos belonging to the Hierakonpolis Expedition. Many thanks to Deborah and John Darnell for sharing with me information on the Nubian evidence from the Western Desert. This is part a wider research on the Pre-protolithic Nubian evidence in Upper Egypt, granted by the Istituto Universitario Orientale, Naples – Progetto Giovani Ricercatori 2001.

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