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## Defining Pan-Grave Pottery

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The subject of my Ph.D. research was the study of the diagnostic traits of the Pan-grave culture and their regional variation within the Egyptian and Sudanese Nile Valley, in the first half of the 2nd millennium B.C. The ultimate aim of the whole project is to clarify and to define the social and economic pattern of the Pan-grave culture and its territorial distribution along the Nile Valley, as well as the relationship that linked the Pan-grave people to Egypt.

The initial part of this research is an attempt to identify and define the typical features of the Pan-grave pottery, in order to distinguish the Pan-grave from the other Middle Nubian groups. The most intricate problems in the study of Nubian pottery is the identification of decorative models and the attribution of them to each of the Middle Nubian cultures, Pan-grave, C-group and Kerma. This turned to be a very difficult task as most of the decorative patterns are very similar in the three main attributes: shape, surface treatment and decoration. For this purpose, I produced an updated version of the Pan-grave pottery Corpus. This Corpus, the result of the cataloguing work and of a fresh analysis of all the Pan-grave pottery available from excavations and museums, was not intended as a simple description of the pottery, but was carried through in order to identify the cultural traits of the Pan-grave pottery tradition, as regards decoration as well as shape; and to find different pottery types for daily use, on the one hand, and for cult use linked to funerary rites on the other. Indeed, this distinction between settlement pottery and funerary pottery in the Pan-grave culture turned out to be most interesting, leading to new results.

### Descriptive criteria

The descriptive criteria of the Pan-grave pottery were taken from the cataloguing and classification of Middle Nubian pottery production made by Bietak (1966; 1968) and by Nordström in the 1980's. Bietak proposes a division

of the Pan-grave repertoire in nine main groups, based on the decoration (Fig. 1), while surface treatment and shape are not taken into consideration as main attributes, with the exception of four-horn plates (type P14).

The typology of Pan-grave pottery proposed by Nordström is based on his ware concept and he divides the pottery corpus in four type groups distinguished by the surface features, including colour, surface treatment and decoration: P1 (Drab coarse or smooth wares; Drab, plain polished wares); PII (Plain polished black ware); PIII (Black incised wares); PIV (Polished red-and-black wares). With these two studies as a base, I evaluated which criteria could be most suited for a grouping of the Pan-grave pottery.

The possibility of using pottery fabrics as a basic criterion had to be ruled out. The analysis of pottery fabric cannot yet be used in this phase of the work. In fact it is currently in progress.

Shape also cannot be a distinguishing criterion: Pan-grave pottery is exclusively hand-made, and therefore very often asymmetrical, with differences in the dimensions and in the diameter-to-height ratio within the same vessel, which could be misleading if calculated too exactly. Moreover, the Pan-grave pottery is composed only by open forms as cups and dishes.

Surface treatment, as proposed already by Nordström, I considered to be the most appropriate choice. Moreover, surface treatment and the black-topped technique are the most evident characteristics of Pan-grave pottery.

Using Nordström's criteria and incorporating new data from my up-dating of the Pan-grave pottery Corpus, I could work out a new typology dividing Pan-grave pottery in five main groups:

- Group I. Uncoated ware
- Group II. Uncoated black topped ware
- Group III. Red coated black topped ware
- Group IV. Red coated ware
- Group V. Black coated ware

In fact re-analysing Nordström's typology I found out that his Type Group PIII (Black Incised Wares) does not exist outside the Scandinavian concession in the Wadi Halfa reach. Type Groups PI, PII and PIV are conventionally described as polished, while as I will explain in detail below, Pan-grave pottery is characterised by the technique of burnishing and never by polishing<sup>1</sup>. At the

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<sup>1</sup> Nordström used the terms burnish and polish synonymously while recognizing the distinction between them as different degrees and techniques of surface compaction (Nordström 1972: 46f.) For practical reasons he retained the term polish in concordance with the general use in the pottery descriptions at that time (pers. communication, 2006).

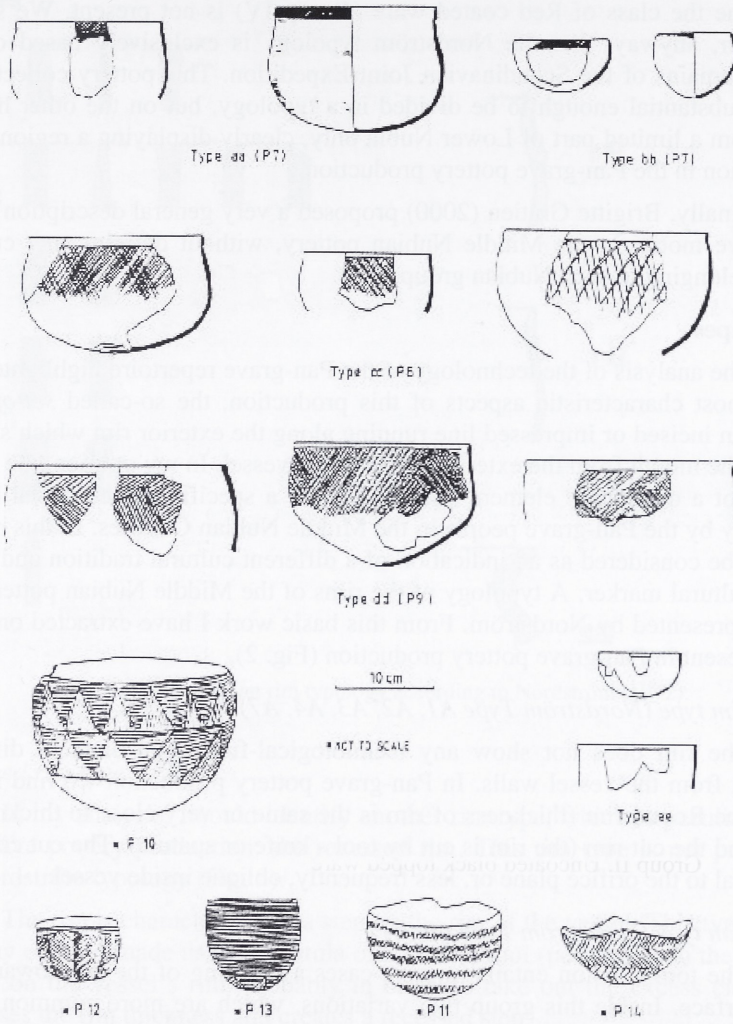


Fig. 1. Pan-grave typology according to Bietak (1966; 1968).

same time the class of Red coated ware (Group IV) is not present. We should remember, anyway, that the Nordström typology is exclusively based on the pottery remains of the Scandinavian Joint Expedition. This pottery collection is indeed substantial enough to be divided in a typology, but on the other hand it came from a limited part of Lower Nubia only, clearly displaying a regional differentiation in the Pan-grave pottery production.

Finally, Brigitte Gratien (2000) proposed a very general description of the decorative motifs in the Middle Nubian pottery, without defining any cultural marks belonging to each Nubian group.

### **Rim shapes**

The analysis of the technology of the Pan-grave repertoire highlighted one of the most characteristic aspects of this production, the so-called *set-off rim*. This is an incised or impressed line running along the exterior rim which sharply divides the mouth from the external walls of the vessel. In my opinion, the *set-off rim* is not a decorative element but the sign of a specific technological choice used only by the Pan-grave people in the Middle Nubian Cultures. In this respect it could be considered as an indication of a different cultural tradition and therefore a cultural marker. A typology of the rims of the Middle Nubian pottery was already presented by Nordström. From this basic work I have extracted only rim types present in Pan-grave pottery production (Fig. 2).

#### *Direct rim type (Nordström Type A1, A2, A3, A4, A7)*

The rim does not show any technological-functional element differentiating it from the vessel walls. In Pan-grave pottery production we find in particular the Round rim (thickness of rim is the same or very close to thickness of body) and the cut rim (the rim is cut by tool - knife or spatula). The cut could be horizontal to the orifice plane or, less frequently, oblique inside vessel.

#### *Set-off rim type (Nordström Type A8, B1)*

The tool's action entails in most cases a swelling of the rim towards the outer surface. Inside this group two variations, which are more common in the Pan-grave repertoire, can be highlighted:

A8: The rim outlined by the incised or impressed line leans to the outside. Internally the rim and the body are seamless.

B1: The rim outlined by the incised or impressed line has a twisting profile, and it is convex due to the manual pressing of the potter on the inside of the vessel, just under the inside profile of the rim. This rim is typical of the cups with a bag-shaped contour, for example.

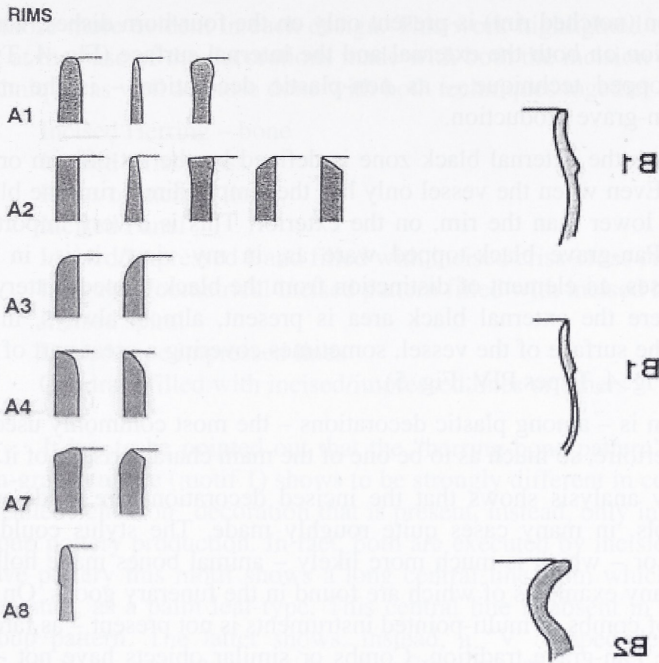


Fig. 2. Middle Nubian rim typology according to Nordström (1972).

### *Recessed rim type*

In my analysis, I could identify another rim-type, which is peculiar of the Pan-grave pottery production: the recessed rim. This rim type is not present in the Nordström typology (Fig. 3).

The rim is characterised as a step on the rim of the vessel. This type of rim is in my opinion made using a spatula or a similar tool (perhaps even the potter's hands) on the vessel's rim, probably in order to take out the excess clay. This decreases the rim thickness and creates a recessed step.

### *Decoration and surface colour*

Also as regards the decoration it is possible to extrapolate elements that can be used in defining and distinguishing the Pan-grave pottery from the rest of the Middle Nubian pottery production.

The decoration (both the "plastic" and "non-plastic" kind) in the Pan-grave pottery is usually on the upper body, less frequently on the whole of the exterior surface. Some examples have also a geometric decoration on the base.

Rim top decoration (notched rim) is present only on the four-horn dishes, which may have decoration on both the external and the internal surface (Fig. 4, Type Pli). The black-topped technique – as non-plastic decoration – is the most common in the Pan-grave production.

In most cases the external black zone is defined by the set-off rim or by the recessed rim. Even when the vessel only has the simple direct rim, the black area seldom goes lower than the rim, on the exterior. This is a very important characteristic in Pan-grave black-topped ware as, in my view, it is, in the majority of the cases, an element of distinction from the black topped pottery of the C-Group, where the external black area is present, almost always, in an irregular way on the surface of the vessel, sometimes covering a great part of the external surface (Fig. 4, Types PIV; Fig. 5).

The incision is – among plastic decorations – the most commonly used in the Pan-grave repertoire, so much as to be one of the main characteristics of it.

The pottery analysis shows that the incised decorations are made with single-pointed tools, in many cases quite roughly made. The stylus could be made from wood or – which is much more likely – animal bones made hollow and sharpened, many examples of which are found in the funerary goods. On the contrary, the use of combs or multi-pointed instruments is not present – as far as we know – in the Pan-grave tradition. Combs or similar objects have not – to date – been found in Pan-grave tombs.

Impression as a plastic decoration is much less frequent in the Pan-grave production and usually is in combination with criss-cross incisions. It is made with a stylus which can be used vertically, pressing only the tip of the tool in the still fresh clay (dotted impressed), or slightly leaning, pressing also part of the stylus on the vessel wall (drop-impressed) (Fig. 6b, c).

Among the impressed decorations, there can be found some made with rope impressions. The rope impressions usually run at the edge of the rim band or they limit bands filled with incised decoration on the upper body. This kind of decoration seems to be copied from Middle Kingdom/SIP Egyptian production but in this case with a decorative – rather than technological – intention (Fig. 6a). The decoration by impression is focused mostly on the rim band, making dotted lines with an effect identical to the more classical incised line, or on the base of cups in order to create geometric motifs. Only on the Four-horn plate types may usually have more elaborated impressed decoration.

The decorative motifs in the Pan-grave production are characterised by infinite variations. For on the main goal of this study, i.e. to highlight Pan-grave decorative traditions and possible cultural marks, it was necessary to proceed assembling the decorations in large groups, extrapolating common characteristics

or those more evident in each design. This work highlighted the elements which are at the base of the decorations made with both the incision and the impression technique, as well as those done with both techniques together :

- Incised Herring – bone
- Incised Criss-cross
- Rows of incised lines
- Incised Panel
- Incised/Impressed Band filled with incised criss-cross or others
- Irregular geometrical incised pattern filled with incised lines
- Incised spiral
- Dotted/rope impressed lines
- Quadrant filled with incised/impressed lines or others

It has to be pointed out that the “herring-bone pattern” decoration in the Pan-grave culture (motif 1) shows to be strongly different in comparison with the so-called “chevron” decoration that is present, instead, only in the Kerma and C-Group pottery production. In fact, both are executed by incisions but in the Pan-grave pottery this motif shows a long central line from which smaller diagonal lines start, as a palm leaf-type. This central line is absent in the Kerma and C-Group pattern. The latter shows, instead, a “V” shaped design composed of incised lines with alternate direction (Fig. 7). This is another important diagnostic trait of the Pan-grave production that could be used to make distinctions in the Middle Nubian pottery.

The chronological analysis of the development of the decorative techniques and design models has given significant results in the study of the pottery of Nubian cultures in general. For the Pan-grave culture, on the contrary, it would be extremely complex to have a chronological examination of the decorative development. These people, in fact, appear and disappear in the Nile Valley in less than 200 years. The chronological range of their pottery production is very short and it does not show basically any development both in decorative technique and motifs.

We tried therefore to infer decorative models from the Pan-grave tradition, obtaining some interesting observations, but linked – for now – only to regional differentiations.

### **Surface treatment**

Finally, the Burnishing technique is the surface treatment that most commonly appears in the Pan-grave production and it could be crucial in order to distinguish Pan-grave from C-Group and Kerma pottery. In fact, burnishing

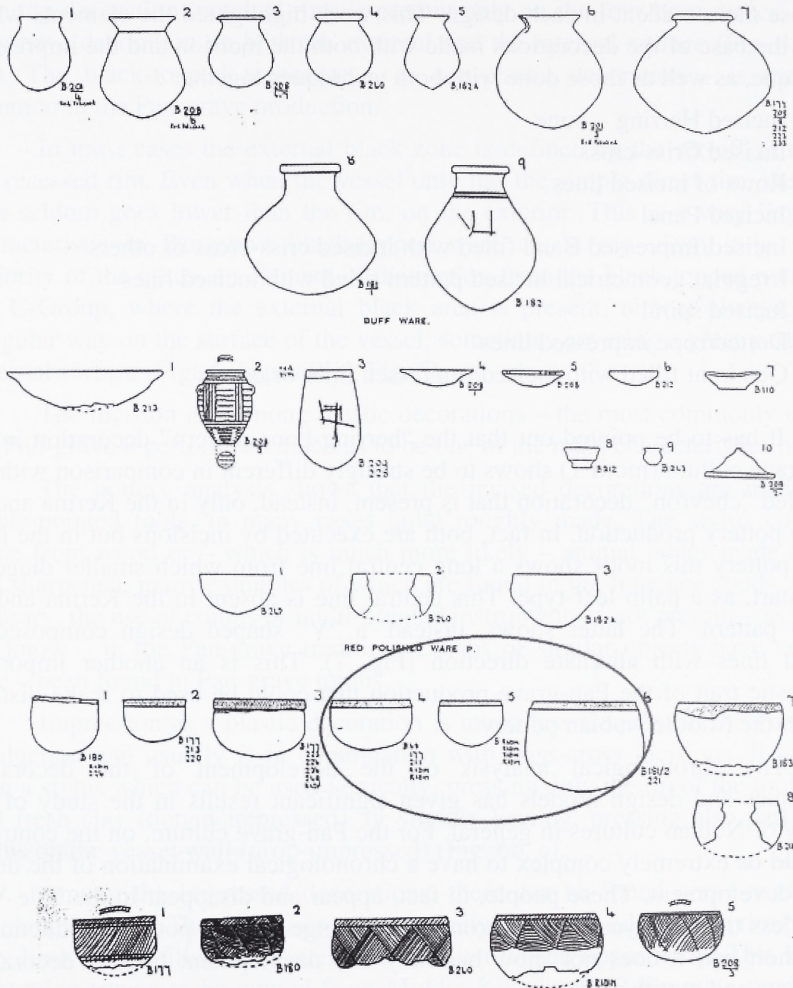
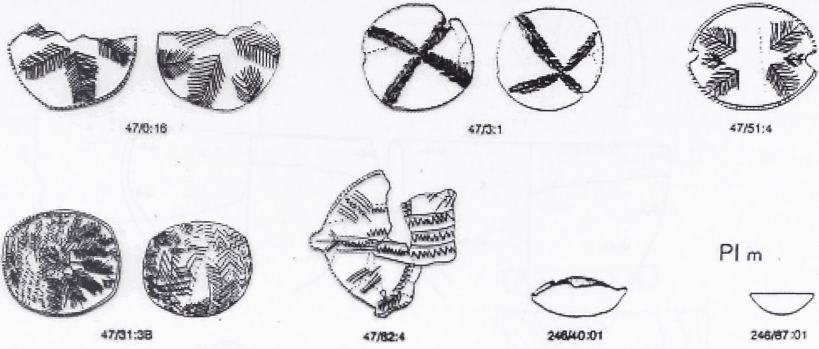


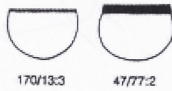
Fig. 3. Examples of Pan-grave bowls with recessed rims from Balabish (Wainwright 1915).



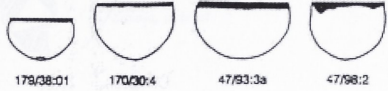
PI I



PIV a2



PIV a4/6



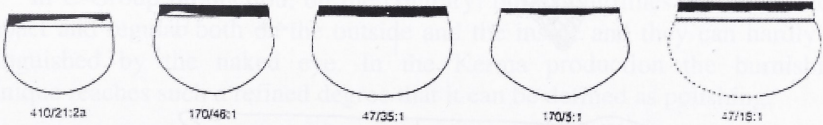
PIV a7



PIV b2



PIV b4



Pan-Grave. Types PII-PIVb4.

Fig. 4. Pan-grave pottery from SJE concession (from Nordström 1989).

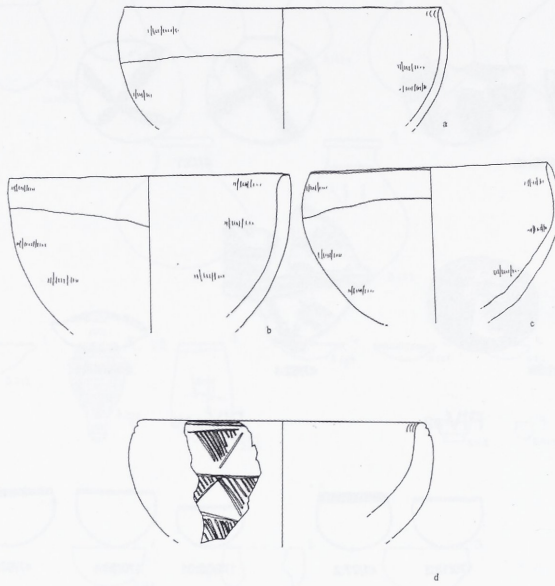


Fig. 5. C-group bowls from Hierakonpolis HK27C (from Giuliani 2001a),

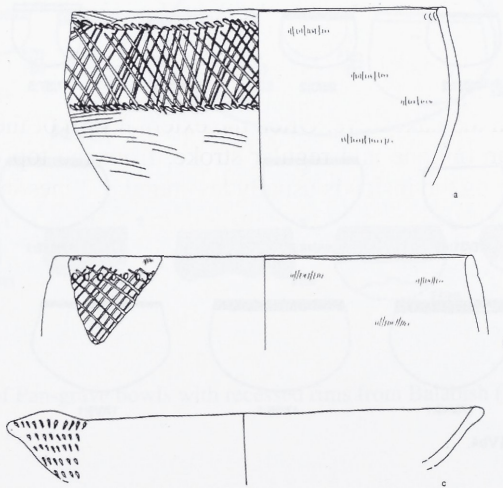


Fig. 6. Pan-grave pottery from Hierakonpolis, HK47 (from Giuliani 2001a).

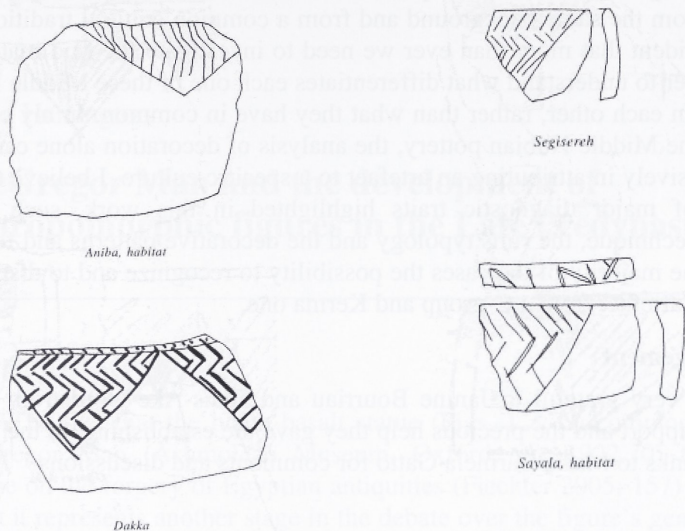


Fig. 7. Examples of "chevron" decoration in the C-group pottery (from Gratien 2000).

marks on the walls of the Pan-grave vessels are, for the most part, rather wide and drawn quite roughly, so much that every stroke is easily detected apart from the others with the naked eye. Often the external wall of the vessel has burnishing lines with an oblique and regular stroke, from the top (rim) downwards (base). The burnish on the inside is usually less regular. Lines in this case go both downwards and upwards, with an orthogonal trail of bands of oblique lines, on top of the vertical ones.

In C-Group production, on the contrary, burnishing lines are much more compact and regular both on the outside and the inside and they can hardly be distinguished by the naked eye. In the Kerma production the burnishing technique reaches such a refined degree that it can be defined as polishing.

### Summary

To sum up, the systematic analysis of the whole Pan-grave pottery production and the comparison of it with the other Middle Nubian pottery highlighted the individuality of Pan-grave pottery production.

Generally speaking, the Middle Nubian pottery production appears to have rather few diagnostic features. Shapes, decorations and surface treatments came originally from the same background and from a common cultural tradition. It is therefore evident that more than ever we need to investigate the find material in detail in order to understand what differentiates each one of these Middle Nubian cultures from each other, rather than what they have in common. In my opinion, as regards the Middle Nubian pottery, the analysis of decoration alone cannot be used conclusively in attributing an artefact to a specific culture. I believe that the definition of major diagnostic traits highlighted in this work, such as the burnishing technique, the rims typology and the decorative patterns and features, give us in the majority of the cases the possibility to recognize and to distinguish a Pan-grave artefact from a C-group and Kerma one.

### Acknowledgement

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