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The most ancient evidence of the "A-Groups" Culture in Lower Nubia

Introduction

Nordström, in his exhaustive 1972 work on the so-called "A-Group" Culture of Lower Nubia, divides it into three main phases : Early, Classic and Terminal (Nordström 1972).

According to Nordström, the Early A-Group phase is represented by sites located between Kubbaniya, north of Aswan, and the Dakka-Sayala plain, at the mouth of Wadi el Allaqi. This phase is contemporaneous with Kaiser's Egyptian Nag. Ic-IIc and can be divided in two sub-phases. Finds related to the initial part of the Early A-Group can be found at Kubbaniya, Cemetery South, and at Khor Bahan, Cemetery 17. The collections belonging to these sites are dominated by Egyptian materials, and for scholars like Junker, Smith and Nordström himself, it could be possible that these are remains of an Amratian colonization in Lower Nubia, even if an indigenous origin of the A-Group seems likely. During the later stage of that phase, contemporary with Nag. IId-d, the A-Group Culture expands till the Dakka-Sayala plain, and evidence of it can be found in many sites such as Cemeteries 76-79 at Gerf Hussein, 99-102-103 at Dakka, 136-148 at Sayala and at the storage pits at Khor Daud. On the other hand there is another cultural group in the Wadi Halfa reach, the Terminal Abkan, which seems to be somewhat different from the A-Group, even if contemporary with it.

In the new chronology presented by Williams in 1986 (Williams 1986), the Early A-Group phase is dated from Nag. Ib to Nag. IId and is divided into two stages: stage IA, with Khor Bahan as a type site, when materials in Nubia were indistinguishable from those of Nagada I, and stage IB, with Dakka as a type site, during which the A-Group pottery first acquired a distinct character. These two stages are respectively dated Nag. Ib-IIa and Nag. IIa-c.

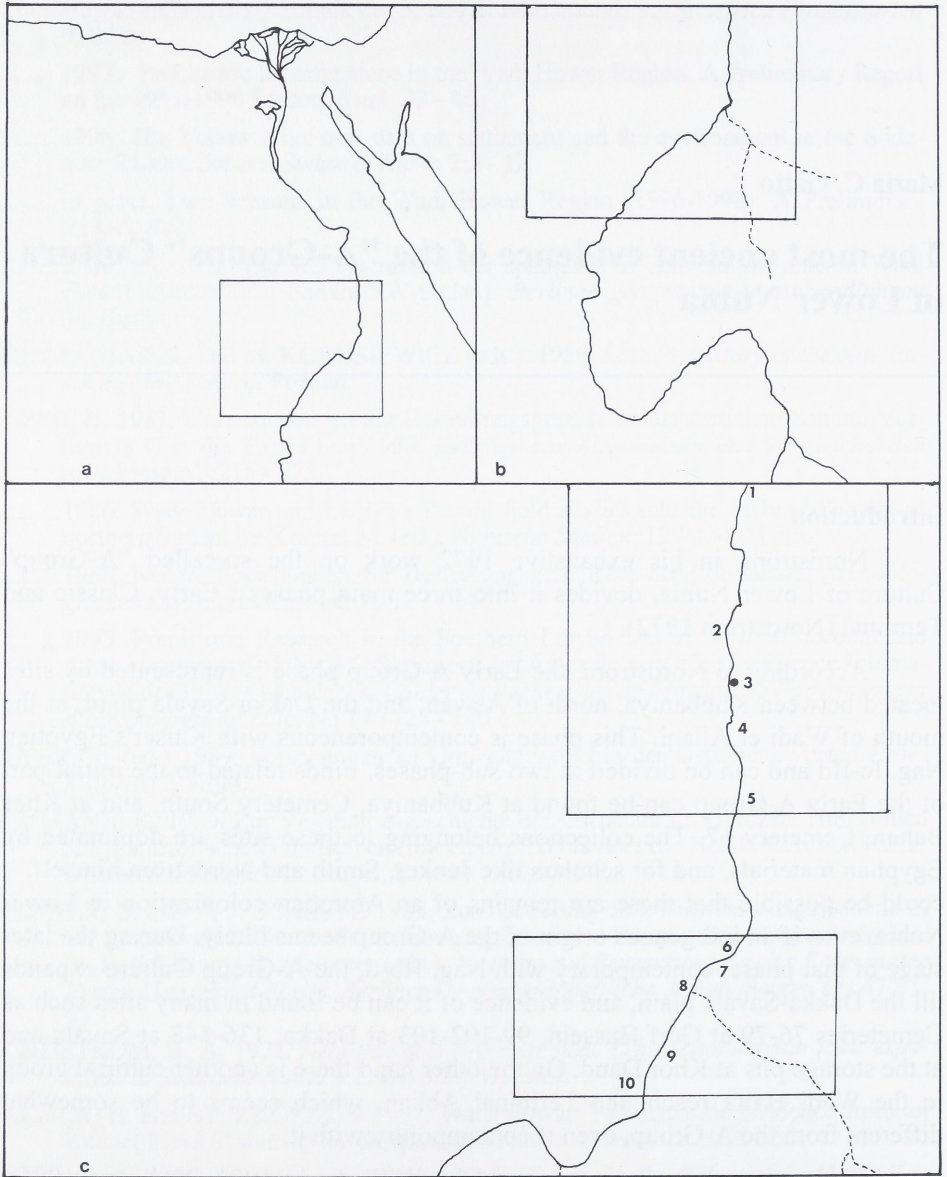


Fig. 1

a: Location of Lower Nubia in NE Africa; b: Location of Lower Nubia in Northern Sudan;
 c: Early "A-Groups" sites mentioned in the text: 1 Gebel el Silsila 2 Kubbaniya 3 Aswan-Elephantine 4 Khor Bahan 5 Matardul 6 Gerf Hussein 7 Khor Daud 8 Dakka 9 Sayala 10 Mediq.

In 1991, Smith (1991) made a new study on the development of the A-Group Culture in Northern Lower Nubia. According to him, there was probably an indigenous group living in that region during the Nagada I phase. During Nag. Ic-IIa, trade relations began between Egypt and Nubia, extending as far as Dakka. This is evident through Egyptian artifacts in Nubian graves and by Nubian incised pottery (Petrie's class N) in Egyptian contexts. Many of the so-called B-Group's tombs could belong to these earliest phases. During Nag. I Ib-c, trade expanded up to Sayala and, in all probability, this means that the Early A-Group was exploiting the Eastern Desert, looking for gold. In the Nag. IId-IIIa period, the Early A-Group came in contact with the Abkan peoples of the Cataract Region. This transformed and unified both cultures which then developed into the Classic A-Group.

We can summarize the available data as follows :

- perhaps an indigenous group lived in Nubia, between Kubbania and Dakka during Nag. I;
- beginning from Nag. Ic this Nubian group started making contact with the Nagadians of Upper Egypt and evidence of that contact can be found at first in the area of the First Cataract;
- from Nag. I Ia, contacts between Nagadians and Nubians reached the Dakka plain;
- during Nag. I Ib trade expanded till Sayala;
- in the Nag. I Id period the Early A-Group started making contact with the Abkans of the Second Cataract area and developed into the Classic A-Group.

However, in my opinion, some of these points could be changed. In fact, if we analyse the evidence coming from the Early A-Group sites more deeply, we find that there are many differences between sites of the First Cataract and those of the Dakka-Sayala plain, and that the evidence of contacts between the area of Dakka and Upper Egypt are as old as those from the First Cataract. To better explain my point of view, I have selected Cemetery 17 at Khor Bahan and Cemetery 103 at Dakka as case studies but I would like to deal with a general presentation of the Early A-Group site distribution first.

Because of the great differences between the material found in the main areas of Lower Nubia, in this essay I will use the term "A-Groups" instead of "A-Group".

Early "A-Groups" site distribution in Northern Lower Nubia

The upper part of Lower Nubia (Fig. 1) can be divided into two areas: the area of the First Cataract, approximately from Gebel es Silsila to Metardul and the area of Dakka-Sayala from Gerf Hussein to Mediq at the mouth of Wadi el Allaqi, one of the main routes to the Eastern Desert (Gatto 1997; in press).

In the First Cataract area, 15 sites related to the "A-Groups" were recorded. Of these only Kubbaniya South and Khor Bahan have graves of the Early "A-Groups" phase, both Stage 1 and 2 (dated respectively to Nag. Ic-IIa and Nag. I Ib-c), while another 8 sites probably contained graves belonging more to the second than to the first stage. Kubbaniya South and Khor Bahan are located very close to Elephantine Island where, recently, a Naqada settlement, dated to the Nag. II-III period, was found (Seidlmayer 1996). At all of the sites, most of the material belongs to the Naqadian tradition, and, as many scholars have already noted, it is very hard to distinguish some of these sites from those found in Upper Egypt (Nordström 1972). As a whole the sites belonging to the First Cataract region have yielded materials of the Naqada tradition.

Thirty-four sites classified as "A-Groups" were found in the Dakka-Sayala area, of these only 18 have graves of the Classic and Terminal "A-Groups" phases. The remaining sites include 4 which can be certainly (and 5 probably) attributed to both the early phase and 7 featuring graves of Stage 2. Moreover, another large site at Dakka - still unpublished - is probably to be dated from the Early to the Terminal "A-Groups" phases. The 4 Early phase sites are located in the central upper part of the area, around Dakka and include cemeteries 99-102-103 at Dakka and all of the numerous storage pits clustered around Khor Daud (Piotrovsky 1967). Half of the archaeological material collected from the Dakka-Sayala plain comes from Upper Egypt, the rest is of local manufacture. However, distribution of the percentage of the two groups of materials differs from site to site.

Cemetery 17 at Khor Bahan

Cemetery 17, excavated by Reisner in 1909 (Reisner 1910) is situated along the northern alluvial terrace at Khor Bahan. Out of the numerous graves of the cemetery 35 are described by Reisner as "Egyptian Early and Middle Predynastic", 29 human graves and 15 animal burials as B-Group. As is well known following Smith, we should attributed all the B-Group's tombs to the Early "A-Groups" phase. Consequently I have considered the entire repertoire as belonging to the Early phase. Therefore we are dealing with 64 human graves and 15 animal burials:

- 34 human graves with an oval or circular shape,
- 11 human graves feature a rectangular shape with rounded corners,
- 18 human graves have been damaged,
- 10 animal burials are commonly oval or circular,
- 4 animal burials are damaged,
- 1 animal burial has a rectangular shape with rounded corners.

The largest human grave is No. 50 (220 /200 cm), the smallest is No. 94 (65/40

cm). The graves are usually lined with mud or matting, and are oriented according to the flow of the Nile. Fifty-one bodies were found: 23 males, 10 females, 4 children and 14 unidentified adults of which only 3 were double graves (2x men, 1x a woman). The most common position of the body is contracted, lying on the left side with the head to the south and the face to the west. Associated with the burials are leather, mats, wooden chests, wooden beds and ochre.

The offerings for the dead are usually personal adornments, such as beads of various shapes and materials (including lapis-lazuli from tomb 15 and silver from tomb 66). Pendants, amulets, bracelets and remains of a fringed leather decorated with small mud or wooden beads, probably from a kind of kilt, associated with a male grave were also found. Moreover the following objects occurred:

- stone vessels (11 from tomb 83),
- mortars, grinders and pebbles,
- objects made of bone and ivory,
- copper tools,
- gold objects (from tomb 15),
- lithic artifacts (very numerous in tomb 50),
- 14 mace heads associated with male graves,
- bread models and cakes,
- 23 Egyptian and 8 Nubian palettes,
- minerals and organic remains,
- a seal from tomb 15 (a female burial),
- seeds, shells and sacrificed animals.

Of the 15 animal burials, 13 contained dogs (many are multiple burials); one a sheep or goat and 2 contained oxes.

Obviously, the pottery is the most common feature. In my study I referred to the sample previously indicated by Reisner (1910). Of the whole collection (238 vessels) I have considered only the 205 pieces which might be classified as either of Egyptian or Nubian manufacture. After processing the data 85% of products had to be considered Egyptian and only 15% Nubian (Fig. 2). In my study, the Egyptian vessels were grouped in ware classes, following Petrie's typology with only few differences (the term H-Hard Pink was used instead L-Late), and the Nubian pottery was classified according to a new typology which I developed and elaborated and which is primarily based on the treatment of the surfaces.

This new, and very simple, typology was necessary because both Nordström's "Type Groups" and Williams's "Form Groups" (the most comprehensive works on the "A-Groups" pottery) were not based on all the ceramic material but mainly on the Classic and Terminal one. Apart from the terms used in the original

publications, the Early "A-Groups" pottery was briefly classified only by Smith (1991). The following main classes are now tentatively suggested:

BM – Black-Mouthed, Red-Brown Polished, Rippled Ware (Junker: *rotpolierte schwarzgesäumte Ware*; Reisner: EP I, MP I, LP I, LP II, ED I; Firth: RPBM; Emery, Kirwan: XIII, XIV, XVI, XVII, XIX; Nordström: A IX, A X; Williams: II, VI; Smith: RPBM).

BL – Black Ware (Junker: *schwarzpolierte Ware*; Reisner: EP I, MP I, ED I; Firth: RPBM, Black-Brown Polished; Nordström: A V, A VI, A VII; Smith: Black Polished Ware).

RP – Red-Brown Polished Rippled Ware (Reisner: EB II; Firth: Thin Smooth Red or Brown / Red Polished Ware; Emery, Kirwan: XV, XXI; Nordström: A III, A IV; Williams II: VI).

SC – Smooth Coarse Red-Brown Ware (Junker: *Ersatz für dunkelrot polierte Ware*; Reisner: MP IV, LP VII, ED II; Firth: SCRW; Emery, Kirwan: XVIII, XXI; Nordström: A I; Williams: XI; Smith: SCRW).

IN – Incised-Impressed Black-Brown-Red Ware (examples of this ware can be found in many classes of the previous typologies).

PA – Interior and Exterior Painted Ware (Firth: Thin Red Painted and Polished with Basket patterns; Emery, Kirwan: XII; Nordström: A II, A VIII; Williams: I, V; Smith: Thin Red Ware with Red-Painted patterns; Griffith: Variegated Haematitic Ware).

SF – Simple Fine Ware (Williams VI).

Figure 2 shows that Black-Topped vessels average 67% of the total, while the other six Egyptian classes are much less represented, sometimes with only one item of the class. Concerning the Nubian products, only 4 classes are represented at Cemetery 17, all related to utility ware, apart from 3 vessels decorated with incisions.

Finally, as regards the distribution of pottery into Stages 1 and 2, according to the processed material we can say that during the first stage the Egyptian wares total 82%, the Nubian wares only 18%; however during the second stage most of the pottery (93%) is Egyptian and just a small percentage (7%) is Nubian (Fig. 2).

Regarding the social complexity, it seems that in Cemetery 17 there is no clear social differentiation between the burials. Only 4 seem to be more interesting. These include grave 50, possibly a male burial, containing 41 vessels and many other grave goods; also grave 78, another male burial because of the presence of a kilt. Both are dated to the first stage. Also of interest are grave 15, a female burial with a mud seal, gold and lapis-lazuli and grave 66, a double female burial, both dated to the second stage. Some kind of differentiation seems to

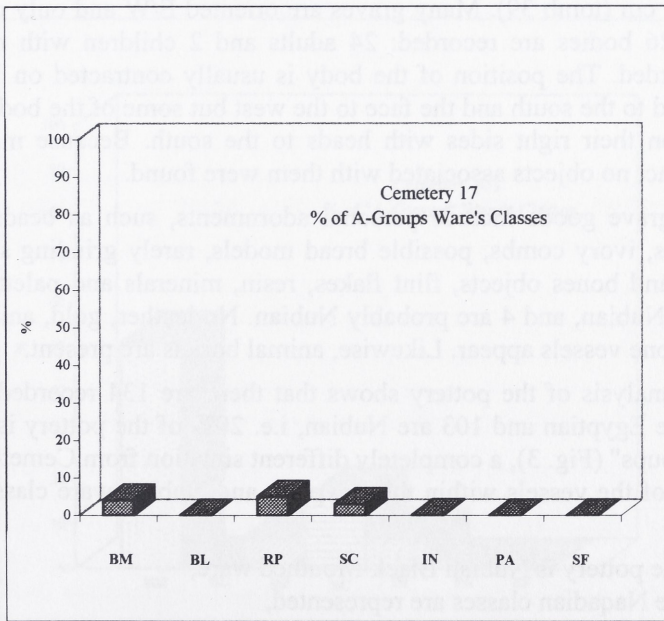
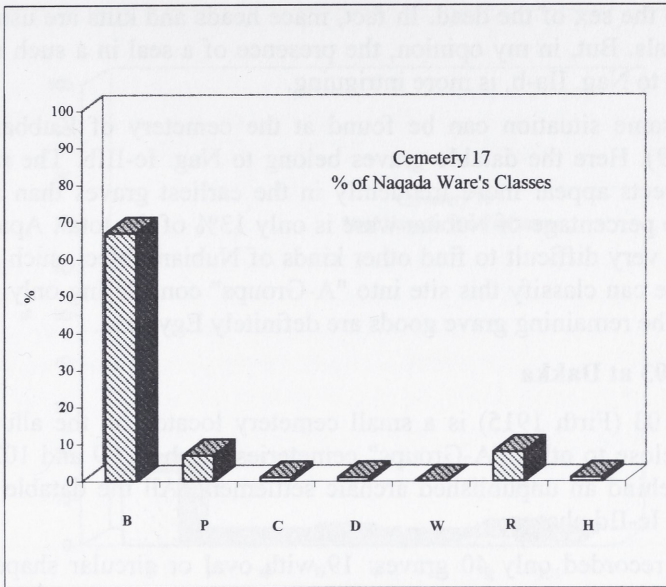


Fig. 2. Percentage of Naqada and "A-Groups" wares in cemetery 17

be related to the sex of the dead. In fact, mace heads and kilts are usually linked to male burials. But, in my opinion, the presence of a seal in a such rich female burial, dated to Nag. Ila-b, is more intriguing.

The same situation can be found at the cemetery of Kubbaniya South (Junker 1919). Here the datable graves belong to Nag. Ic-IIIb. The rare Nubian tradition objects appear more frequently in the earliest graves than in the later ones and the percentage of Nubian ware is only 13% of the total. Apart from the pottery, it is very difficult to find other kinds of Nubian object, such as palettes. Therefore we can classify this site into "A-Groups" considering only the Nubian ware, since the remaining grave goods are definitely Egyptian.

Cemetery 103 at Dakka

Site 103 (Firth 1915) is a small cemetery located on the alluvial Dakka plain, very close to other "A-Groups" cemeteries (such as 99 and 102), and immediately behind an unpublished archaic settlement. All the datable graves belong to Nag. Ic-IId phases.

Firth recorded only 40 graves: 19 with oval or circular shapes, 17 with oval shapes or rectangular with rounded corners, 3 with lateral niches, and 1 with an indefinite shape. The dimensions of the graves vary from 155/110 cm (tomb 26) to 50/35 cm (tomb 39). Many graves are oriented E/W and only one is lined with mud. 26 bodies are recorded: 24 adults and 2 children with no multiple burials recorded. The position of the body is usually contracted on its left side with the head to the south and the face to the west but some of the bodies are also contracted on their right sides with heads to the south. Because many burials were not intact no objects associated with them were found.

The grave goods include personal adornments, such as beads, bracelets and pendants, ivory combs, possible bread models, rarely grinding stones, pebbles, ivory and bones objects, flint flakes, resin, minerals and palettes. Six are Egyptian, 5 Nubian, and 4 are probably Nubian. No leather, gold, animals, mace heads nor stone vessels appear. Likewise, animal burials are present.

The analysis of the pottery shows that there are 134 recorded vessels of which 26 are Egyptian and 103 are Nubian, i.e. 20% of the pottery is Naqadian, 80% "A-Groups" (Fig. 3), a completely different situation from Cemetery 17. The distribution of the vessels within the Egyptian and Nubian ware classes (Fig. 3) shows that:

1. 51% of the pottery is Nubian Black-Mouthed ware,
2. Not all the Naqadian classes are represented,
3. Practically all the Nubian wares are present, except Painted and Simple Fine wares, which are typical of the Classic and Terminal "A-Groups" phases.

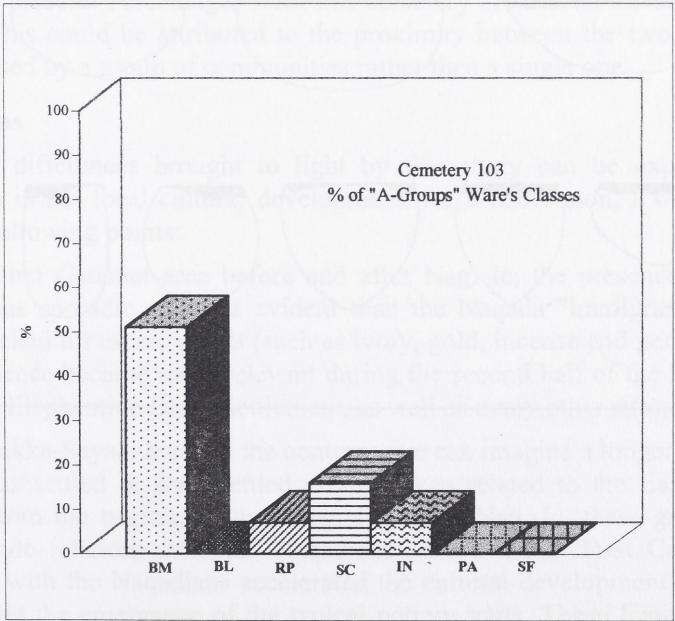
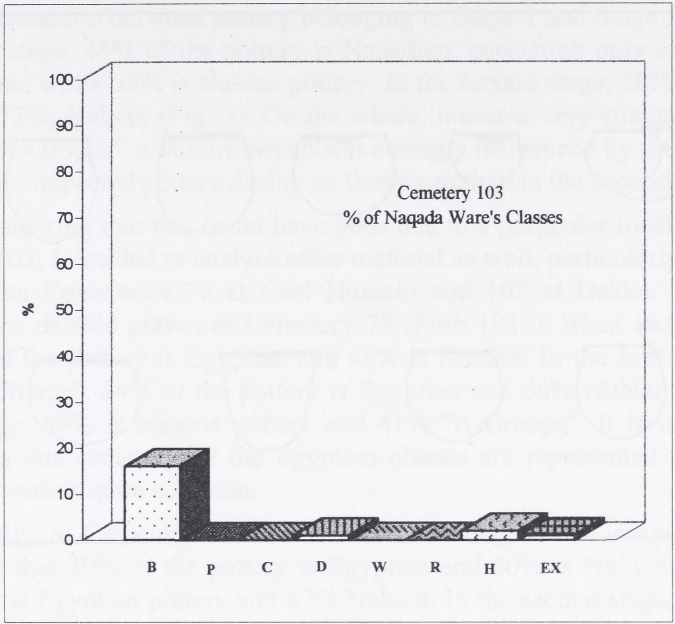


Fig. 3. Percentage of Naqada and "A-Groups" wares in cemetery 103.

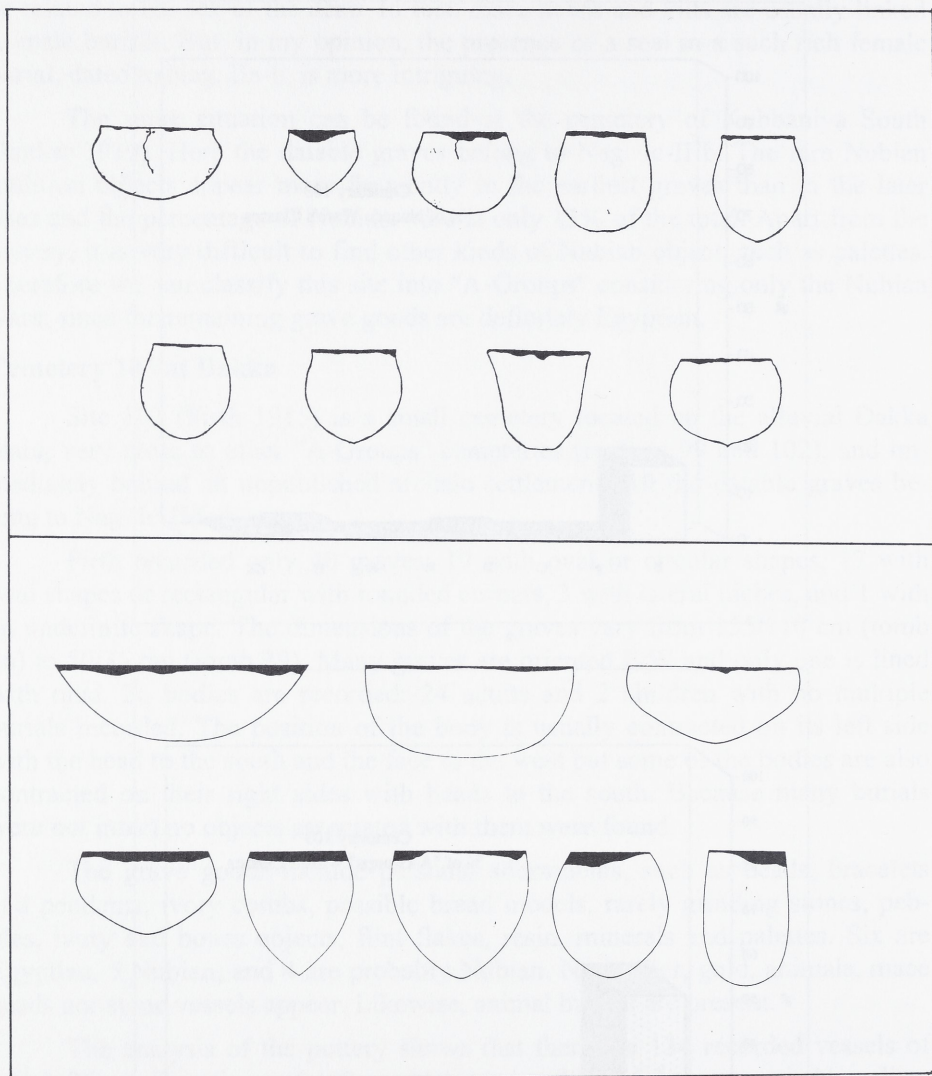


Fig. 4. Examples of Early, Classical and Terminal "A-Groups" BM pottery.

A distinction between pottery belonging to Stage 1 and Stage 2 shows that in the first stage, 45% of the pottery is Naqadian, consisting only of the Black-Topped class, while 55% is Nubian pottery. In the second stage, 28% is Egyptian ware, and 72%, Nubian (Fig. 3). On the whole, it seems very strange to me that the Early "A-Groups", a culture which was strongly influenced by the Nagadians, yielded more imported pottery during its first stage than in the second one.

Considering that this could have been due to a particular local situation in Cemetery 103, I decided to analyse other material as well, particularly the pottery coming from Cemeteries 79 at Gerf Hussein and 102 at Dakka. The vessels coming from datable graves of Cemetery 79 (Firth 1912), when analysed, show that 55% of the pottery is Egyptian and 45% is Nubian. In the first stage of the Early "A-Groups", 34% of the pottery is Egyptian and 66% Nubian. During the second stage, 59% is Naqada pottery and 41% "A-Groups". It is interesting to note that in this cemetery all the Egyptian classes are represented and that the Decorated ware is quite common.

Finally, at Cemetery 102 (Firth 1915), the largest "A-Groups" cemetery, we can see that 40% of the pottery is Egyptian and 60% is Nubian. In the first stage, 43% is Egyptian pottery and 57% Nubian. In the second stage, 39% of the wares are Egyptian and 61% are local. Here as at Cemetery 79, more Nagada classes are present. Percentages from this cemetery are almost the same as from site 103. This could be attributed to the proximity between the two cemeteries, probably used by a group of communities rather than a single one.

Conclusions

The differences brought to light by this study can be explained with differences in the local cultural development. As a conclusion, I would like to make the following points:

1. In the First Cataract area before and after Nag. Ic, the presence of Nubian people was sporadic and less evident than the Naqada "immigrant" presence who searched for exotic goods (such as ivory, gold, incense and perhaps cattle). This presence became more relevant during the second half of the Early phase, when the Elephantine Island settlement, as well as many other sites, developed.
2. In the Dakka-Sayala area, on the contrary, we can imagine a longer presence of indigenous settled or semi-settled groups, even related to the Eastern Desert region, from the beginning until Nag. Ic. After Nag. Ic, these groups established trade relations with the Naqadians settled in the First Cataract area. Contacts with the Naqadians accelerated the cultural development of the local groups and the emergence of the typical pottery traits. These features include: Black-Mouthed Ware (with shapes different from those of Classic and Terminal phases), Incised-Imprinted Ware, Imprinted and Polished Ware, Polished Ware

and Coarse Ware (Fig. 4). Moreover there are palettes and the similar typology of graves. During the second stage, the increase of commercial relations and expansion of trade circulation brought about contacts with the Second Cataract. In fact, the material related to the Terminal Abkan phase shows a greater influence from the north. Based on the situation illustrated above, I would like to indicate the Dakka-Sayala area as the area of origin of the cultural "A-Groups" development.

3. Regarding the absolute chronology, unfortunately we have no C¹⁴ dates for the Early "A-Groups" phase. Therefore the only possibility we have for dating is to correlate the Nubian data with the Naqadian data. Kaiser's Nagada Ic-IIc can be dated (based on C¹⁴ datings published by Hassan (Hassan 1985, 1988) from about 3750 to 3400 B.C. Recently, Hendrickx (1996) has proposed a new chronology for the Naqadian Culture, according to which the Early "A-Groups" phase can be dated between 3800 and 3500 B.C. Therefore, following Kaiser the two stages of the phases which we have highlighted in this paper should be dated from 3750 to 3600 B.C. (Stage I), and from 3600 to 3400 B.C. (Stage II). Instead, following Hendrickx, the first stage could be dated between 3800 and 3700 B.C., and the second stage between 3700 and 3500 B.C.

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The island is situated between the second and the third cataracts of the Nile south of the State of Khartoum. The island of Suddani is a very fertile area dividing the valley of the Nile into two parts, one flowing in the westerly part by Lake Nubia. It is a large island, extending about 12 km from north to south and 5.5 km from east to west, the centre is mostly sand banks but the river banks include extensive patches of low alluvial soil, but cultivation where the present villages are located (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Location of Suddani.