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A Late Neolithic site near el-Kurru (Sudan)

The site

A surface survey was carried out in the Napatan Region in the concession area of the Archaeological Mission of the University of Cassino, directed by I. Vincentelli (1996; 1997; in press a; in press b) aiming to identify and map archaeological occurrences from all periods (Garcea and Sebastiani, in press). The archaeology in the area is well-known since the beginning of this century for its Late Dynastic, Napatan, Meroitic, Christian and Islamic evidence (Porter and Moss 1951). As a matter of fact, this area was frequented as early as Acheulean times.

Several sites, including concentrations of chipped lithics, were located along the western bank of this part of the Nile Valley. A high frequency of lithics was identified just south of the Napatan cemetery of El Kurru (10th-8th centuries BC). The site, named Uad Shami (18°24'02"N, 31°45'6"E), is located about 9 km south of Jebel Barkal and 4 km north of the village of Zuma. It is situated along the Khor Uad Shami, on the margin of the Jebel Rufa'a (Fig. 1, site No. 27).

Over an area of 50 m², which was divided into two 5x5 m² squares, an intensive surface collection was made. The area corresponded to about one-third of the main artefact scatter. No pottery or organic materials occurred at Uad Shami. All the archaeological material was accumulated on the surface and the anthropic deposit was completely eroded. It is likely that the archaeological debris has never been very thick since its formation, as the site was certainly not a permanent settlement.

Debitage

Lithic artifacts were made of a large variety of raw materials of local origin including Hudi chert, brown chert, translucent flint, variegated agate,

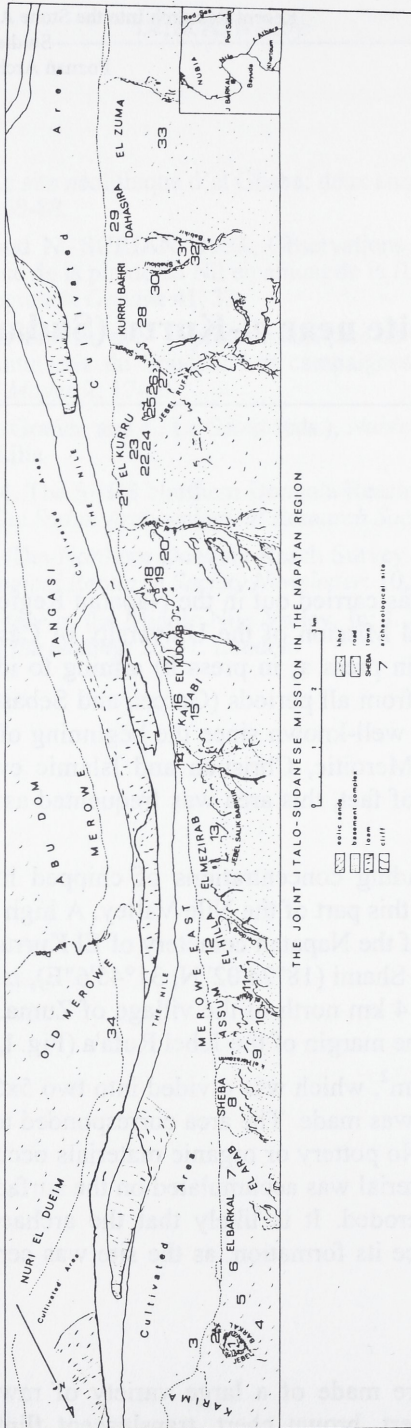


Fig. 1. Map of the surveyed area.

quartzite, quartz, sandstone and petrified wood (Table 1). Hudi chert was yellow-brownish, coarse grained, with gastropods embedded in the rock. Core reduction was made by simple hard hammer technique. Cores with single, opposed and ninety-degree platforms were the most characteristic types for all raw materials (Table 2). *Décorticage* was not really practised: just a few flakes were removed from the cores often leaving more than half pebble unexploited. The presence of cortex did not seem to matter in the final product. Pebbles with more than one-third of cortical surface accounted for over half of the assemblage. Pieces with no cortex had such a feeble frequency that they were certainly not the desired final product (Table 3).

The tool-kit included a wide variety of types (Table 4). Endscrapers were frequent; perforators were important and burins were common (Fig. 2). Notched and denticulated flakes predominated (Fig. 3). Geometric and backed pieces were completely absent. Some bifacially retouched pieces and *galets aménagées* (chopping tools) were also present and, like all other tools, were roughly made.

Results and discussion

As the quantity of cores is equivalent to that of finished tools, it is likely that the knappers from Uad Shami intended to produce one tool from every pebble. Pebbles were simply knapped to sharpen their functional part and to hold them better in the hands.

If we consider that there is an average of about 2 cores and 2 retouched tools per square meter, we may infer that the site was a lithic workshop. If this is so, it is less surprising that no artifacts other than lithics occurred in this place. The area was an optimal location for a lithic workshop. A large variety of raw materials were locally available in the gravel sheet along the Nile. Hudi chert could be found at a distance of no more than 80-100 km. Given this evidence, the site was probably used as a logistic camp for performing stone knapping. Its inhabitants must have practised a nomadic way of life with temporary camps functional to their mixed subsistence economy.

Within the so-called Neolithic horizon, some comparisons may be suggested with other sites in the Dongola Reach (Marks, Hays and de Heinzelin 1967/68; Marks, Shiner and Hays 1968). Similarities appear in the Late Neolithic groups. The El Melik Group, although it is less defined than the other groups, seems to indicate more common traits with the Uad Shami assemblage. Notches and denticulates are the most common class of tools, blades are rare and, as a whole, tool-kits are roughly made. In addition, pottery is normally rare and ground hand stones and querns are uncommon (Marks, Hays and de Heinzelin 1967/68: 190). It should not be ruled out that Uad Shami could be later than 5000 BP and occupy the 5th millennium BP or, if we want to relate it to contemporary

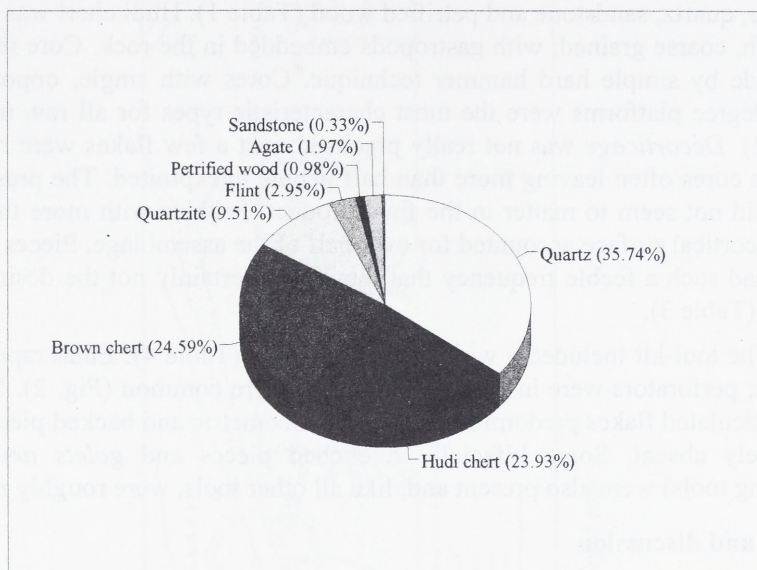


Table 1. Uad Shami: frequencies of raw materials.

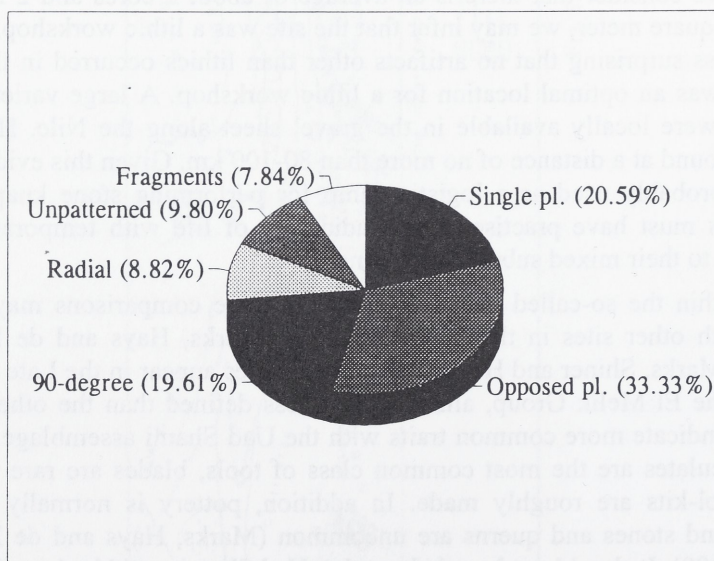


Table 2. Uad Shami: frequencies of cores.

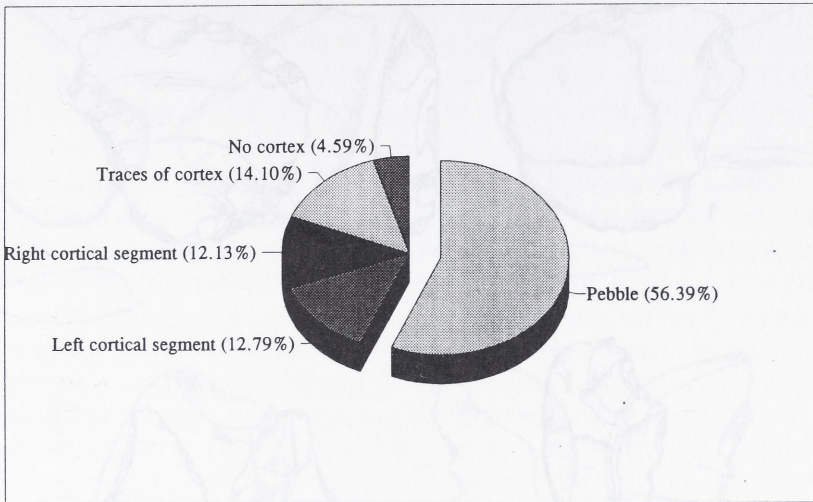


Table 3. Uad Shami: frequencies of cortical pieces.

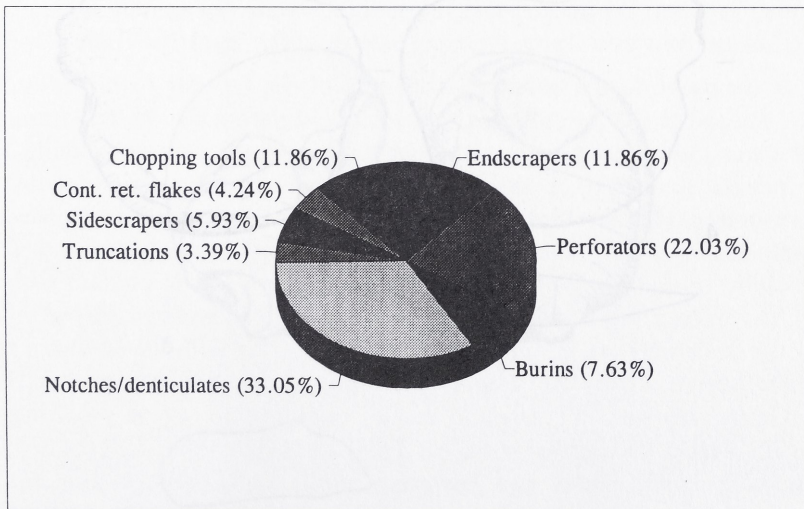


Table 4. Uad Shami: frequencies

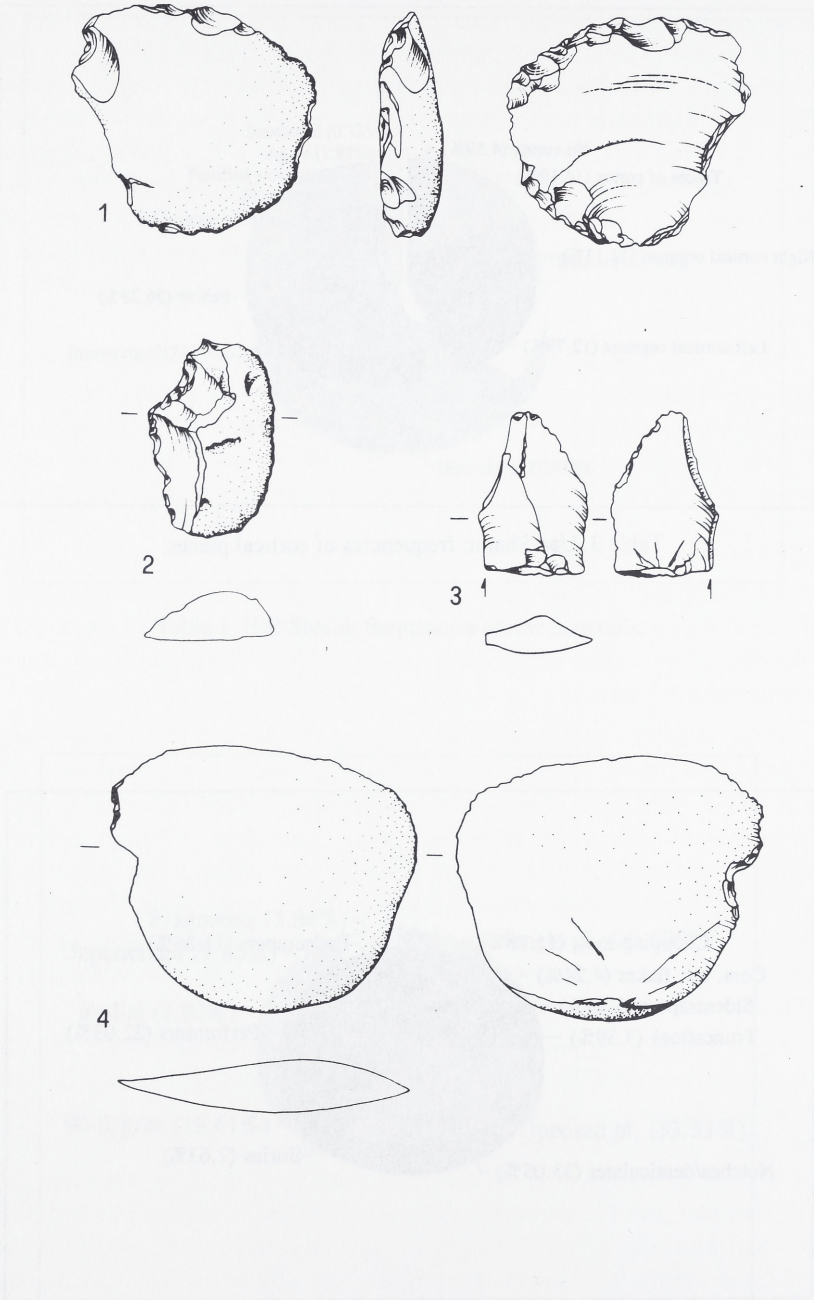


Fig. 2. Lithics from Uad Shami.

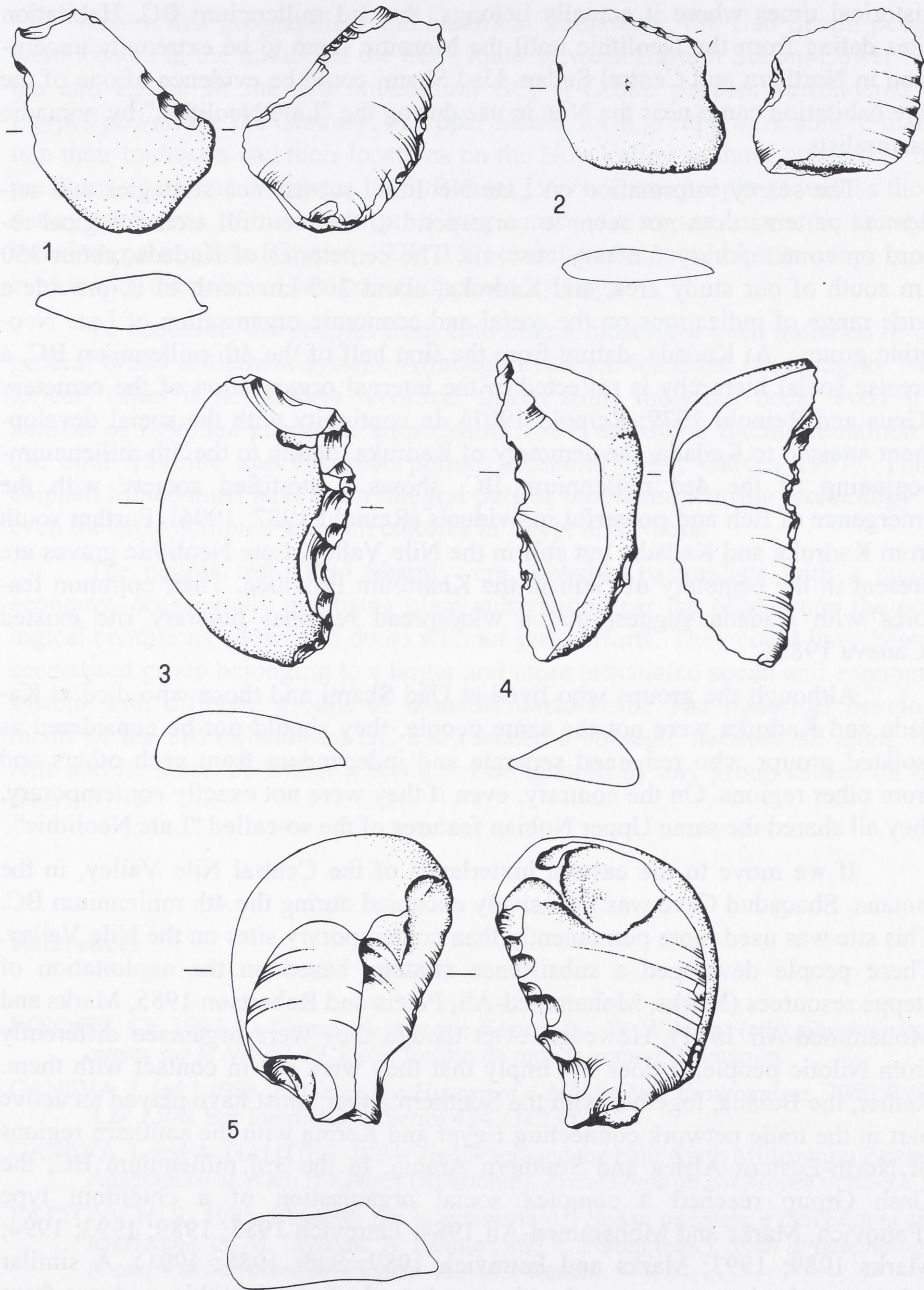


Fig. 3. Lithics from Uad Shami.

historical times where it actually belongs, the 3rd millennium BC. Habitation sites dating from the Neolithic until the Meroitic seem to be extremely uncommon in Northern and Central Sudan. Uad Shami could be evidence of one of the rare habitation camp near the Nile in use during the "Late Neolithic" by nomadic pastoralists.

The scanty information on Late Neolithic subsistence strategies and settlement patterns does not seem to correspond to the plentiful archaeological record on contemporary funerary customs. The cemeteries of Kadada, about 350 km south of our study area, and Kadruka, about 200 km north of it, provide a wide range of indications on the social and economic organisation of Late Neolithic groups. At Kadada, dating from the first half of the 4th millennium BC, a precise social hierarchy is reflected in the internal organisation of the cemetery (Geus and Reinold 1979; Reinold 1991). In continuity with the social development attested to Kadada, the cemetery of Kadruka, dating to the 5th millennium-beginning of the 4th millennium BC, shows a stratified society with the emergence of rich and powerful individuals (Reinold 1987; 1994). Further south from Kadruka and Kadada, but still in the Nile Valley, Late Neolithic graves are present in the cemetery of Geili in the Khartoum Province. Their common features with Kadada suggest that a widespread regional funerary rite existed (Caneva 1988).

Although the groups who lived at Uad Shami and those who died at Kadada and Kadruka were not the same people, they should not be considered as isolated groups who remained separate and independent from each others and from other regions. On the contrary, even if they were not exactly contemporary, they all shared the same Upper Nubian features of the so-called "Late Neolithic".

If we move to the eastern hinterlands of the Central Nile Valley, in the Butana, Shaqadud Cave was intensively occupied during the 4th millennium BC. This site was used more permanently than contemporary sites on the Nile Valley. These people developed a subsistence strategy based on the exploitation of steppe resources (Marks, Mohammed-Ali, Peters and Robertson 1985; Marks and Mohammed-Ali 1991). However, even though they were organised differently from Nilotic people, it does not imply that they were not in contact with them. Rather, the Butana, together with the Southern Atbai, must have played an active part in the trade network connecting Egypt and Kerma with the southern regions of North-Eastern Africa and Southern Arabia. In the 3rd millennium BC, the Gash Group reached a complex social organisation of a chiefdom type (Fattovich, Marks and Mohammed-Ali 1984; Fattovich 1985; 1989; 1993; 1994; Marks 1989; 1993; Marks and Fattovich 1989; Sadr 1988; 1991). A similar subsistence basis was suggested with regards to the Late Neolithic evidence from El Kenger in the Khartoum province (Caneva and Gautier 1994).

Given this geographical and historical framework, the Uad Shami people were located in the middle of the trade route between Eastern Sudan, Lower Nubia and Egypt. In the 3rd millennium BC, A-Group peoples surrendered to Egypt's power. On the contrary, in Upper Nubia, local groups were able to maintain their traditions and their locations on the Nile Valley as those attested to the pre-Kerma settlement (Privati 1988; Bonnet 1997). These people as well as those dating to *Kerma Ancien* were practising a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle based on pastoralism (Gratien 1978: 159) and therefore could better adapt to, or even avoid, the political constraints imposed by Egypt.

To conclude, the peoples from Uad Shami must have been included in the general broad settlement system. Although evidence for stone knapping in "historical" times is not always recorded, flaked stone tools did occur even at a number of Egyptian pharaonic sites (Miller 1987) and stone flaking remained in use until Meroitic and Christian periods (Reinold 1988; Garcea 1997). Thus, chipped lithics must have been integral part of the manufacturing technology of even the most complex and rich cultures in Egypt and Nubia.

The people from Uad Shami were probably pastoralists with a mixed economy, occasionally practising plant cultivation near the Nile, when the ecological conditions allowed to do so without great efforts. They could have been a specialised group belonging to a larger and more articulated social and economic system with different groups of nomadic pastoralists. The historical developments of the 3rd millennium BC had reached a strategic network all along the Nile and its hinterlands that it could not be ignored by any group settled on the river.

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