

Early Neolithic settlement and later cemetery at Geili (Central Sudan)

The Italian Mission for Prehistoric Research in Egypt and the Sudan has been conducting excavations on the site of Geili since 1973 (Caneva, 1978). The site is situated on the eastern bank of the Nile, 47 km north of Khartoum and about 2 km from the river. In the course of five seasons 368 sq.m. have been excavated, to an average depth of 1.2 m. The stratigraphy of the site is complex, testifying to the fact that the site was exploited for a long period of time, both as a settlement and as a cemetery. So far 124 graves have been excavated. Some of these graves reach the dimensions of 2.5 × 2 m. and a depth of 1.2 m. disturbing the earlier settlement deposits.

The site appears to have been used as a cemetery for a long time. Intervals must have separated the periods of its use, so that burials had often been destroyed when a new human group came to the site: graves of different periods often overlap, with frequent re-use of older pits and re-burial of previous skeletons. Only Christian and Islamic graves were intact; this suggests a continuity of use by corresponding communities. Extended burials in narrow, long and deep graves, often with a lateral step, are characteristic of both. They only differ in orientation: north-south in the Islamic graves and east-west in the Christian ones. All Islamic graves were left in place after being documented. Few grave goods accompanied Christian burials, such as clothes, glass pots, necklaces of vitreous paste, iron crosses and ear rings (Fig. 1).

The Meroitic period is represented by several contracted burials in small, deep graves. A wide step runs along the lateral sides, sometimes ending in a ramp (Fig. 1 : 1). Orientation varies as does the side on which the body was laid. Grave furnishings consisted of necklaces, iron ankle rings, copper bowls and pottery, and characteristic flask-shaped, decorated pots which were found in several graves (Fig. 1 : 2, 5, 6). Similar objects occur in the Meroitic necropolis of Soleb (Schiff-Giorgini, 1964) and at el-Kadada (Geus, 1977) where, however, the funeral rites as well as the form of the graves appear to be different.

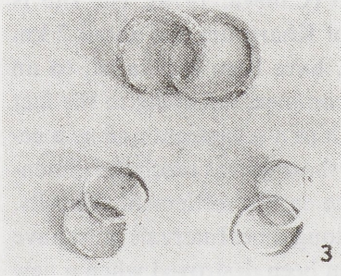
A small number of graves found at Geili have not yet been culturally classified because of lack of grave goods or other diagnostic traits. The presence of some enig-



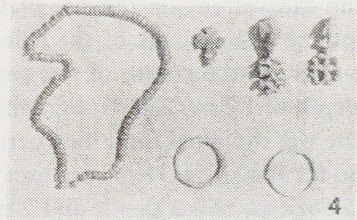
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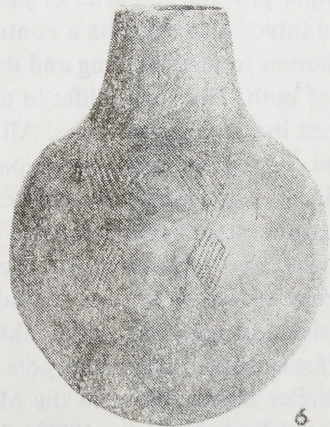
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FIG. 1. Geili. Meroitic/Christian graves and materials

matic social groups, perhaps nomads coming seasonally to the river, could account for some of them.

The most ancient assemblage represented in the necropolis at Geili can clearly be ascribed to the Late Neolithic culture, originally identified by Arkell (1949) at Omdurman and classified under the broad definition of „Protodynastic“. These graves at Geili are oval. They were very shallow because of surface erosion. The skeletons lie in a contracted position, on the right side, oriented roughly W/E or E/W (Fig. 2: 1). The bones were always in very bad condition, but not fossilized. As far as these features are concerned, the evidence from Geili corresponds exactly to that of “Protodynastic” graves from Shaheinab (Arkell, 1953). Grave goods include pottery, necklaces of carnelian, amazon stone and ostrich-egg beads and pendants; there are also quartz-diorite palettes and rhyolite, disk-shaped mace-heads (Fig. 2). Recent excavations at el-Kadada have revealed graves apparently belonging to the same culture. Such features as the grave shape and the position of the skeleton are broadly similar to those observed at Geili; grave goods are sometimes identical (Geus, 1977: Pl. VIII, IX, XI; *id.* 1979: Pl. VI.). As regards the pottery, sherds of shallow plates, spheric or ovoid pots and hemispherical bowls were found at Geili. The surfaces are always burnished, often decorated with impressed or incised motifs; the most characteristic decoration was obtained by slipping and burnishing a previously combed surface (“rippled ware”) (Fig. 5: 12).

The settlement at Geili yielded an amount of potsherds and lithic implements which constitute a very typical Khartoum Neolithic assemblage. The lithic industry includes quartz microlithic tools (crescents, borers, end-scrapers; Fig. 3: 1 - 11). A number of rhyolite tools are also represented, mostly scrapers, points and polished gouges (Fig. 3: 12 - 20). Grinding equipment is characterized by small grinding and pounding stones. Among the bone objects a pottery comb and a few harpoons and perforators were found.

The pottery is the most distinctive trait of this culture. If vessel shapes are simple, including globular pots or hemispherical bowls, their surface decoration is so variable that a simple description of the motifs is meaningless. We therefore made a comprehensive attempt to gain insight in the different technologies underlying the currently used typology (*e.g.*, that of Hays, 1974). This also implied laboratory reconstruction of objects to be tested against the originals. Except for a low percentage of red-slipped and burnished wares, the pottery shows impressed decoration executed with three main techniques (Fig. 4):

1. The most frequent – the rocker technique, employing two kinds of tools: a bent or straight comb, either notched or not, and a forked stick. It produces zig-zag motifs (Fig. 5: 1 - 3, 7) and coupled rows of dots or vees (Fig. 5: 5, 6),
2. The simple impression – realized with the same combs, producing dotted or plain lines (Fig. 5: 9). Very characteristic of this technique is the “dotted wavy line” motif (Fig. 5: 10),

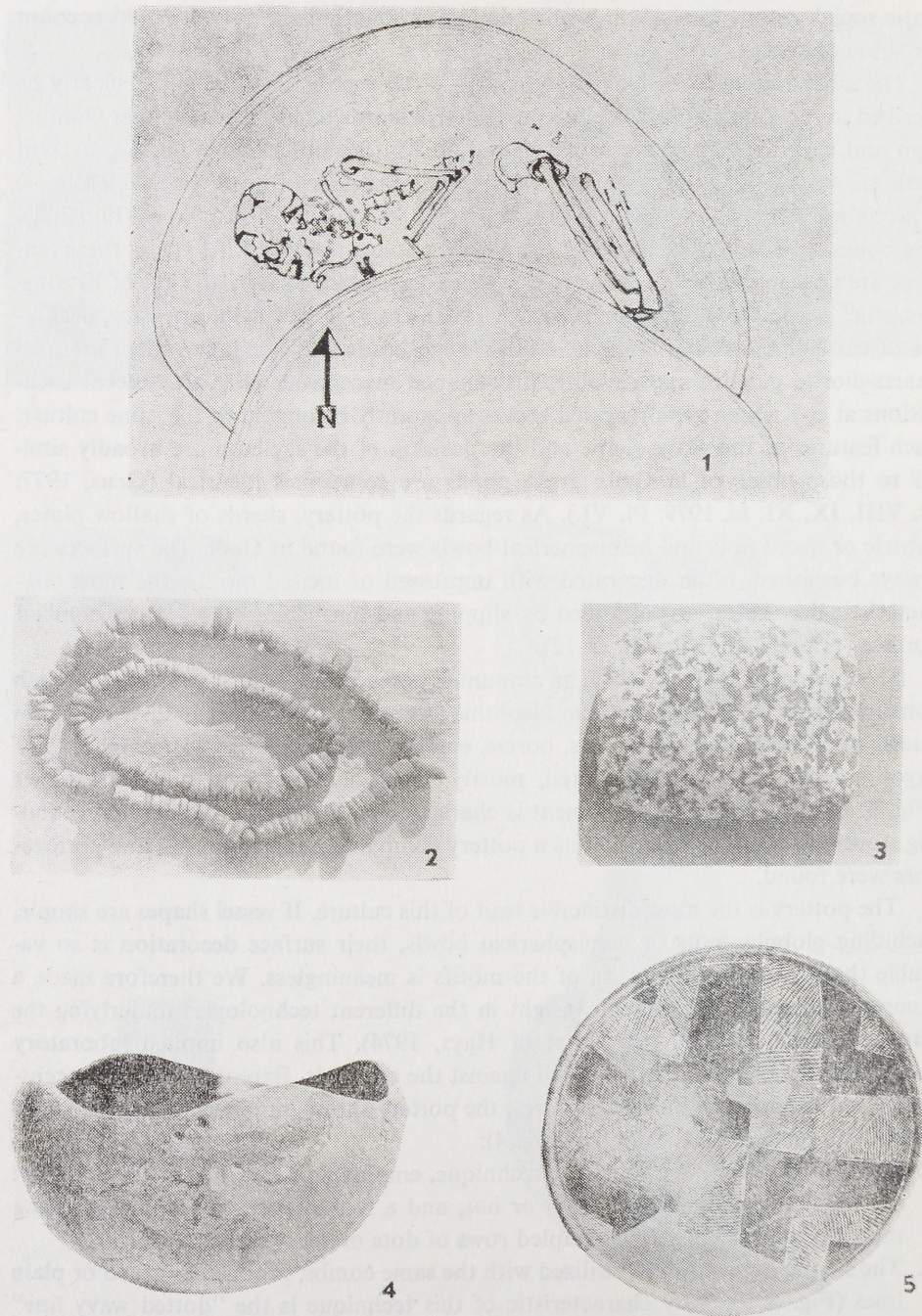


FIG. 2. Geili. Late Neolithic grave and goods

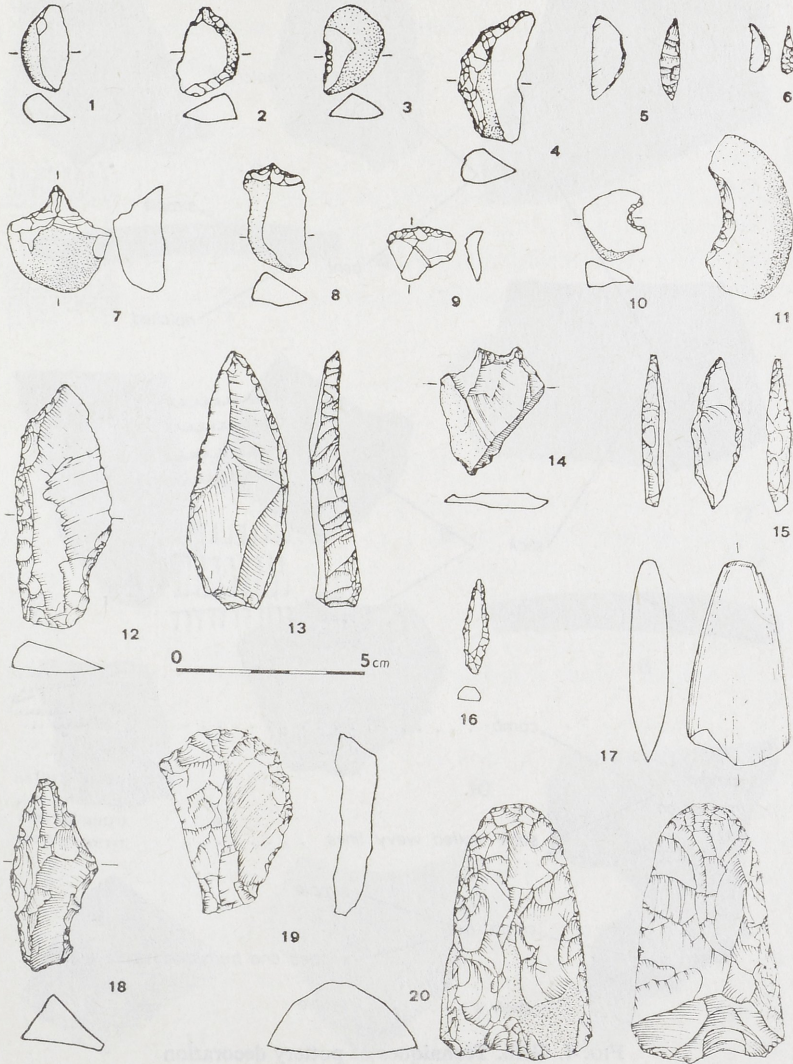


FIG. 3. Geili. Lithic industry from the Early Neolithic settlement

3. The incision — this produces coupled horizontal lines or a vertically combed surface which usually was slipped and burnished afterwards (Fig. 5: 8, 11, 12, 13).

Surfaces are always burnished. Decoration usually covers the upper third of the body, including the rim; rarely the whole surface. Motifs are various but usually depend on the technique employed.

Two chronological phases of the settlement at Geili appear to be represented. The more recent one is characterized by the presence of gouges and other rhyolite tools

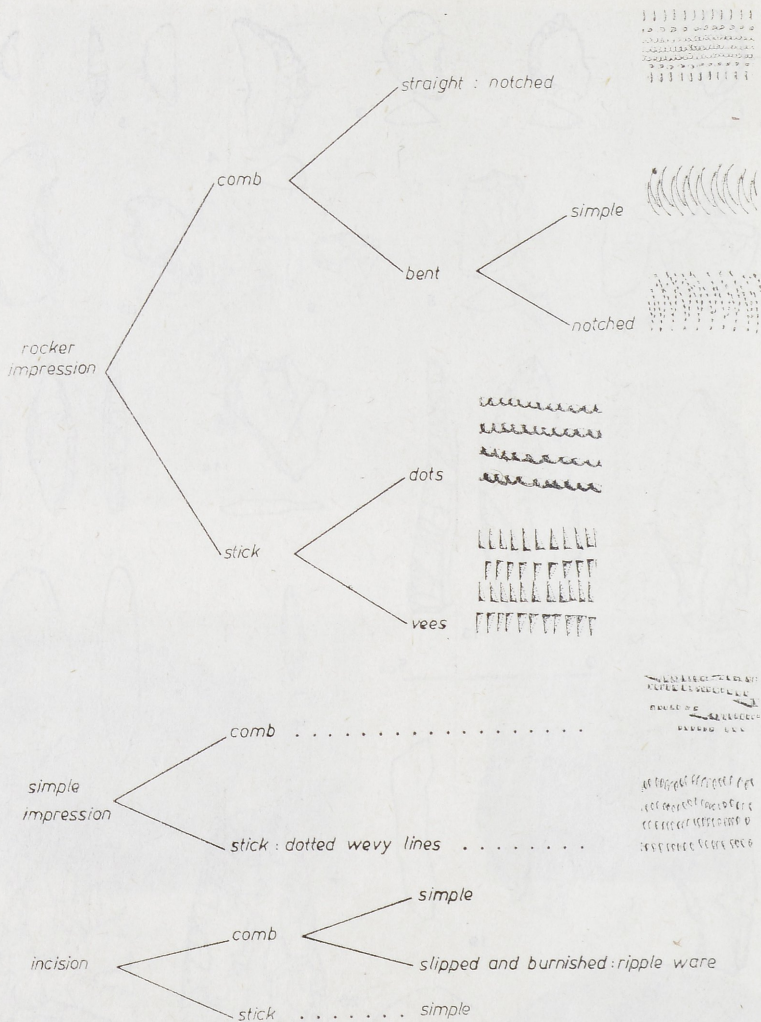


FIG. 4. Geili. Techniques of pottery decoration

which are lacking in the earlier one. The fauna of this recent phase consists of fresh-water molluscs, landsnails, freshwater fish (mainly catfish), monitor lizard (*Varanus*) and crocodile. Most of the mammalian remains are poorly preserved and seem to pertain to game animals including a large bovid, possibly buffalo (? *Syncerus* sp.). Small livestock may also be present, since some remains can be ascribed to domestic goat¹. Hence subsistence activities of this Early Neolithic community appear to have

¹ Preliminary identifications of the fauna were made by Cesare Placidi, comments by Dr. Achilles Gautier (Gent, Belgium) were added.

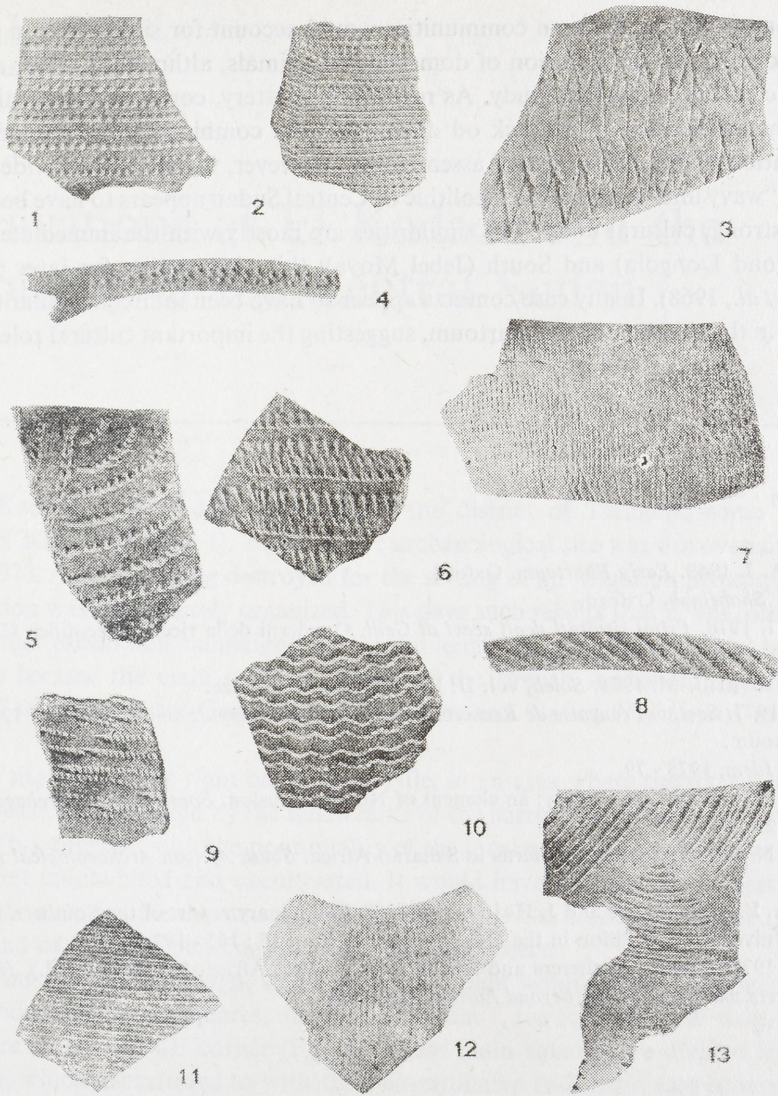


FIG. 5. Geili. Pottery from the Early Neolithic settlement

been based on hunting, fishing and gathering. In Geili we seem to be dealing with the beginning of changes in economic activities towards food production which probably was merely an addition to the dominating food-gathering pattern.

As stressed by Hays (1975) and Shaw (1977), there was a broad continuity in lithic and pottery style between "Mesolithic" and Neolithic complexes in Sub-Saharan areas: the latter just added burnishing of pottery and introduced some elements in the tool kit suggesting an expansion of economic activities but this remained within a continuous, indigenous development. Cultural contacts of the Central Suda-

nese groups with the Saharan communities would account for similarities in pottery decoration and for the diffusion of domesticated animals, although this last mentioned topic still needs further study. As regards the pottery, correlations are still difficult to make because of the lack of documentation combined with the inadequate classification of Neolithic pottery assemblages. However, in spite of the wide occurrence of "wavy line" pottery, the Neolithic of Central Sudan appears to have been a region of strong, cultural unity. The similarities are mostly with the immediate North (not beyond Dongola) and South (Jebel Moya); this also applies for later periods (Marks *et al.*, 1968). In any case contacts appear to have been indirect: similarities are stronger in the sites nearer to Khartoum, suggesting the important cultural role of this area.

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