

SHEMKHIYA

SEASON 2006

Bogdan Żurawski

The volatile situation in the Dar Monasir region in January 2006 resulted in the expedition¹ suspending the Hagar el-Beida part of the project (directed by Marek Chłodnicki) and devoting most of the time, from early February to mid March, to an exploration of the Shemkhiya region on both banks of the Nile, upriver from Umm Safaya and downriver from el-Shellal. The region had not been topmost on the agenda due to the fact that it is to be least affected by the Merowe Dam Lake inundation. Apart from the three left-bank strongholds located near the villages of el-Ar (SH1), el-Meghera (SH8) and el-Tina (island of Tanta), which were surveyed and in the first two cases tested archaeologically, salvage operations included two tumulus cemeteries, the Late Meroitic SH5 and SH10, as well as a Christian burial ground SH9 adjacent to the tumuli field of SH10, the latter two situated landwards from the fort at SH8. An anthropological report from the work by the mission's anthropologist, Karol Piasecki, appears below. The khors joining the Nile downriver from Tanta were explored and discovered to abound in rock art (see separate reports by K. Piasecki and E. Kuciewicz in this volume).

The International Middle Nile Rescue Project has been implemented this year as a joint project of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, which provided most of the funding. The moving force behind this idea was Rita E. Freed, Curator of the Department of Art of the Ancient World at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

1 Baganarti mission staff in the 2006 season: Bogdan Żurawski, Project Director; Adam Łajtar, epigraphist; Tomasz Płóciennik, epigraphist; Magdalena Łaptaś, iconologist; Magdalena Woźniak, archaeologist/iconologist; Anna Błaszczuk, Ewa Kuciewicz, Mariola Orzechowska, Agata Rak, Anastazja Stupko, archaeologists and draftspersons; Dobiesława Bagińska, archeologist/ceramologist; Marta Momot, draftsperson; Martyna Mazur, Ada Oleś-Niedzielska, archaeology student; Karol Piasecki, physical anthropologist; Lisa Hildebrandt, palaeobotanist; Tadeusz Badowski, restorer; Dorota Moryto-Naumiuk, restorer; Ryszard Szemraj, technical assistant, restorer and building engineering supervisor. The geodesic team comprised Roman Łopaciuk, Wiesław Małkowski and Łukasz Moczulski. The NCAM was represented by senior inspectors Ayasha and Fathiya Abder Rahman.

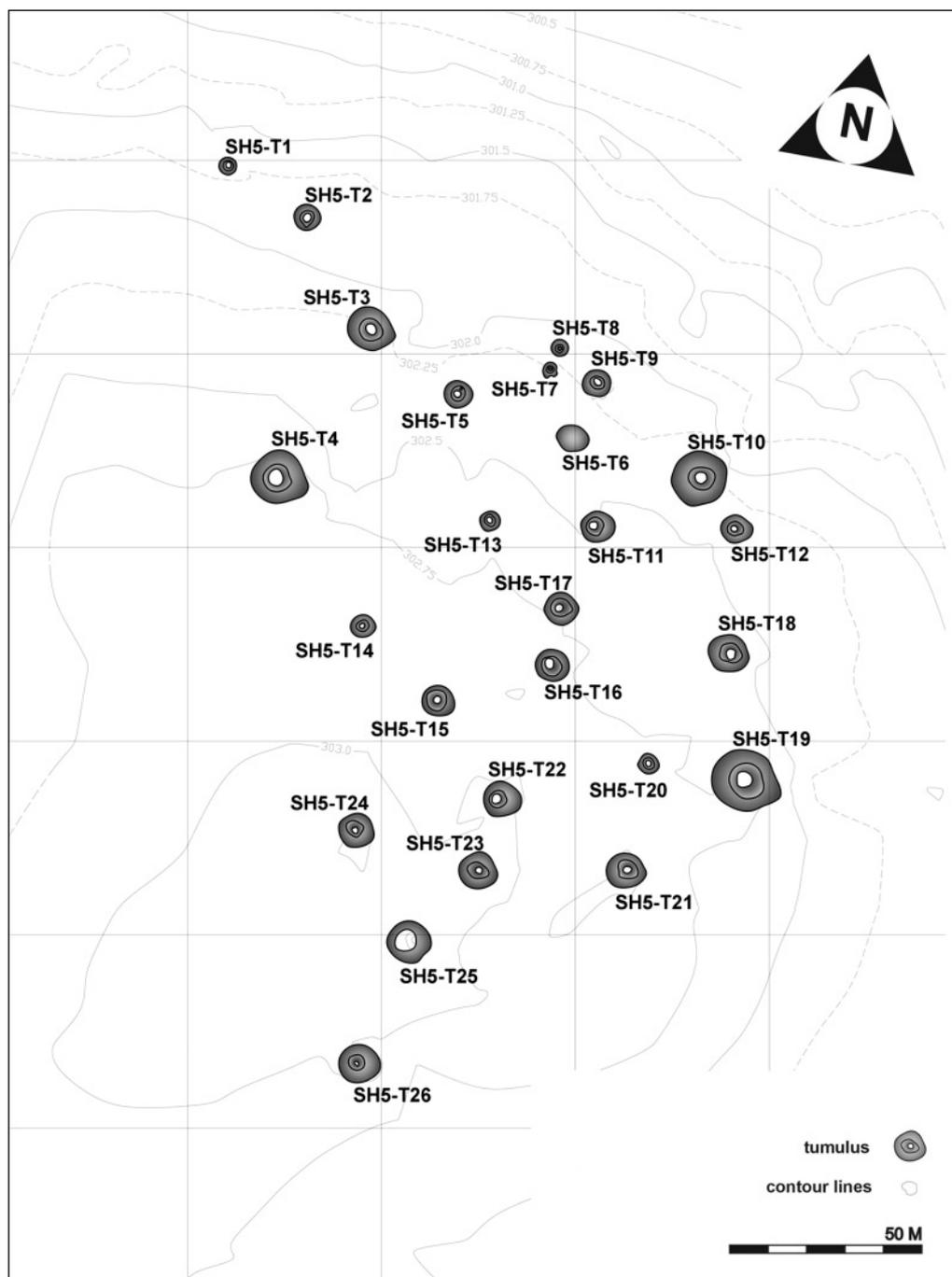


Fig. 1. General survey plan of Shemkhiya SH5 cemetery
(Mapping R. Łopaciuk)

TUMULUS FIELD AT SITE SH5

Excavations of the tumulus field at Shemkhiya (SH5) were undertaken in replacement of the suspended work at the mammoth-size tumulus in Hagar el-Beida (for previous work at the HB1 site, see Lemiesz 2007) and nearby. The 26 tumuli here [Fig. 1] sit on a gravelly plain about 1600 m west of the local benchmark – el-Ar rock, on an “island” between the Nile and a now defunct paleochannel. There are at least six other tumulus fields within a radius

of 2.5 km, those closer to the river identified as bicultural Christian/post-Meroitic units.

Altogether six mounds were explored on SH5, dated by the finds to the 3rd-4th century AD (for a detailed report, see Żurawski forthcoming). They are of two general types: ovoid mound with stone kerb and oval mound of desert gravel without a conspicuous stone core. Three can be numbered among the biggest ones, one is middle-sized, two are small, the diameters

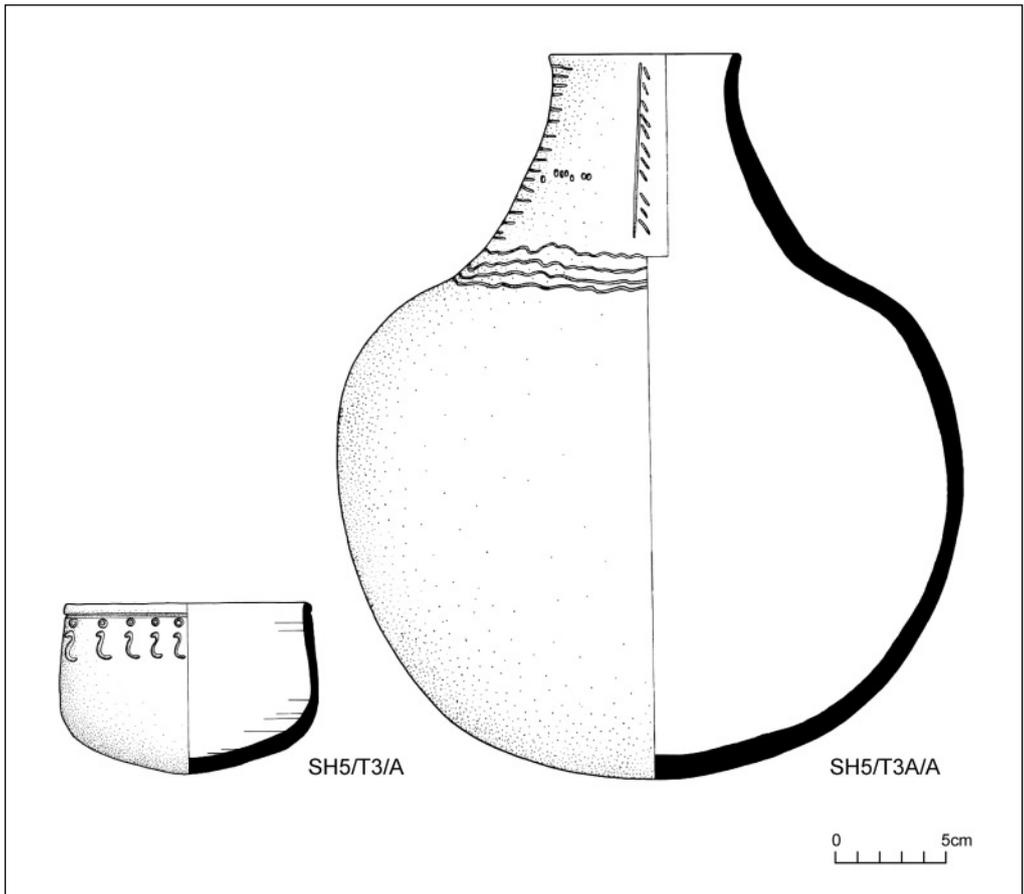


Fig. 2. Meroitic ceramics from an offering pit found in tumulus tomb SH5/T3 (Drawing M. Orzechowska)

of the tumuli ranging from 7.50 m to 20 m (T19). The tumuli of the first type had shafts ringed with stones at the top, filled with mud intercalated with three layers of stones (T3 and T19). The burial chamber of T4 was approached by a sloping dromos with the vertical shaft at the end.

The burials in three cases appeared unplundered (T3, T4, T19) and yet the skeletons were found misplaced, in one case (T19) the body of a woman was found cut in half at opposite sides of the chamber. In T3, a middle-aged (subadultus/adultus) male was buried, apparently in a sort of bag (?) or wrapped in a shroud that has decayed into a compact organic mass, mixed with mud. The skeleton in T4 was that of an adult woman buried on her left side in sub-contracted position with legs bent at the knees, the head to the south and somewhat misplaced. In two burials (T9 and T12), single skeletons of females, 35-45 years old, were found in contracted position on the left side, with the head to the south and facing west. In T6, the body had apparently been laid out on a mat.

Meriting attention was the offering pit found dug in the ground under the mound in the southern part of tumulus T3. It was 0.70 m in diameter and contained a pinkish, hand-made bowl (SH5/T3A/B) and a wet wiped, grayish-brown, blackened jar (SH5/T3A/A) with a wavy-line shoulder ornament and vertical scratched elements, firmly attributable to the Meroitic period [Fig. 2, right] Placed around the neck of the jar was a necklace of 60 glass and stone beads threaded on a thong.

Finds from the chambers included a wheel-made, red slipped bowl (SH5/T3/A) decorated with a relief frieze of urei, evidently of Meroitic manufacture [Fig. 2, left], discovered by the shoulder blade of the male buried in T3, and a white slipped, wheel-made, footed bowl from the Late Meroitic period, found in the burial chamber of T4. Five vessels accompanied the burial in T12: a deep bowl stood close to the pelvis and legs in the northern part of the chamber, and a spouted bowl and another vessel were placed at either side of the skull; a jar and spouted bowl were deposited in the eastern part of the shaft.

The array of beads found with the burials and in the fill of the chambers included strings of beads made of ostrich eggshell predominantly and glass, single beads of stone, carnelian, quartz, glass, faience and glazed, and a glass pendant with threading hole, decorated with a floral motif. In two instances, a copper-alloy earring was also found. A curious amulet(?) pendant made of three sheep bones, perforated and tied together, was discovered near the face of the female burial in T12, which was in any case the most richly equipped as far as jewelry goes.

Fragments of organic substances (perhaps leather) were also noted in some of the burials.

All the excavated tumuli yielded pottery scoopers found in the fill; for example, in T12 two scoopers had been abandoned one above the other, in the upper part of the entrance shaft.

BURIAL GROUND AT SITE SH9

The cemetery of SH9, as well as the nearby tumulus field of SH10, both located inland from the fortress at el-Meghera (SH8) [Fig. 3], represent a transitional period

between the post-Meroitic and Christian kingdoms. The cemetery sits at the foot of the jebel, 350 m to the east of the rocky outcrop of the stronghold from which it is

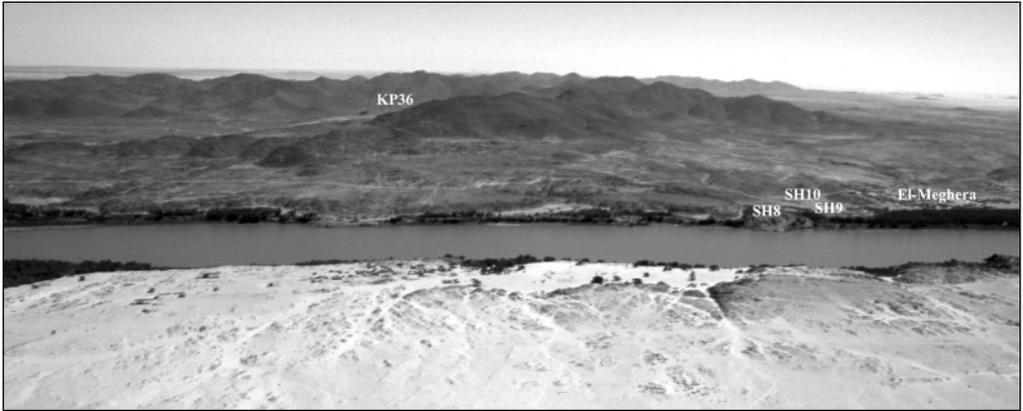


Fig. 3. Left-bank sites SH8, SH9, SH10 and the village of el-Meghera. Gebel el-Gurgurib (with rock-art site KP 36) in the background. February 2003 (Photo B. Żurawski)

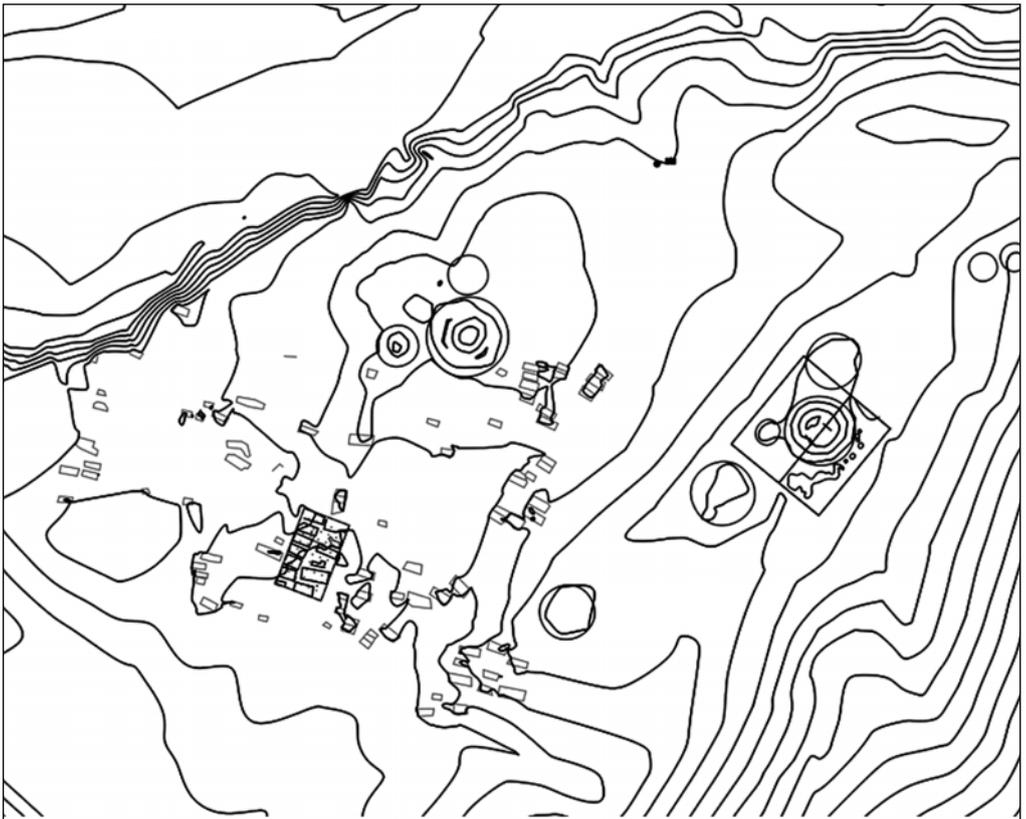


Fig. 4. General survey plan of the cemeteries at Shemkhiya SH9 and SH10 (Mapping W. Matkowski)

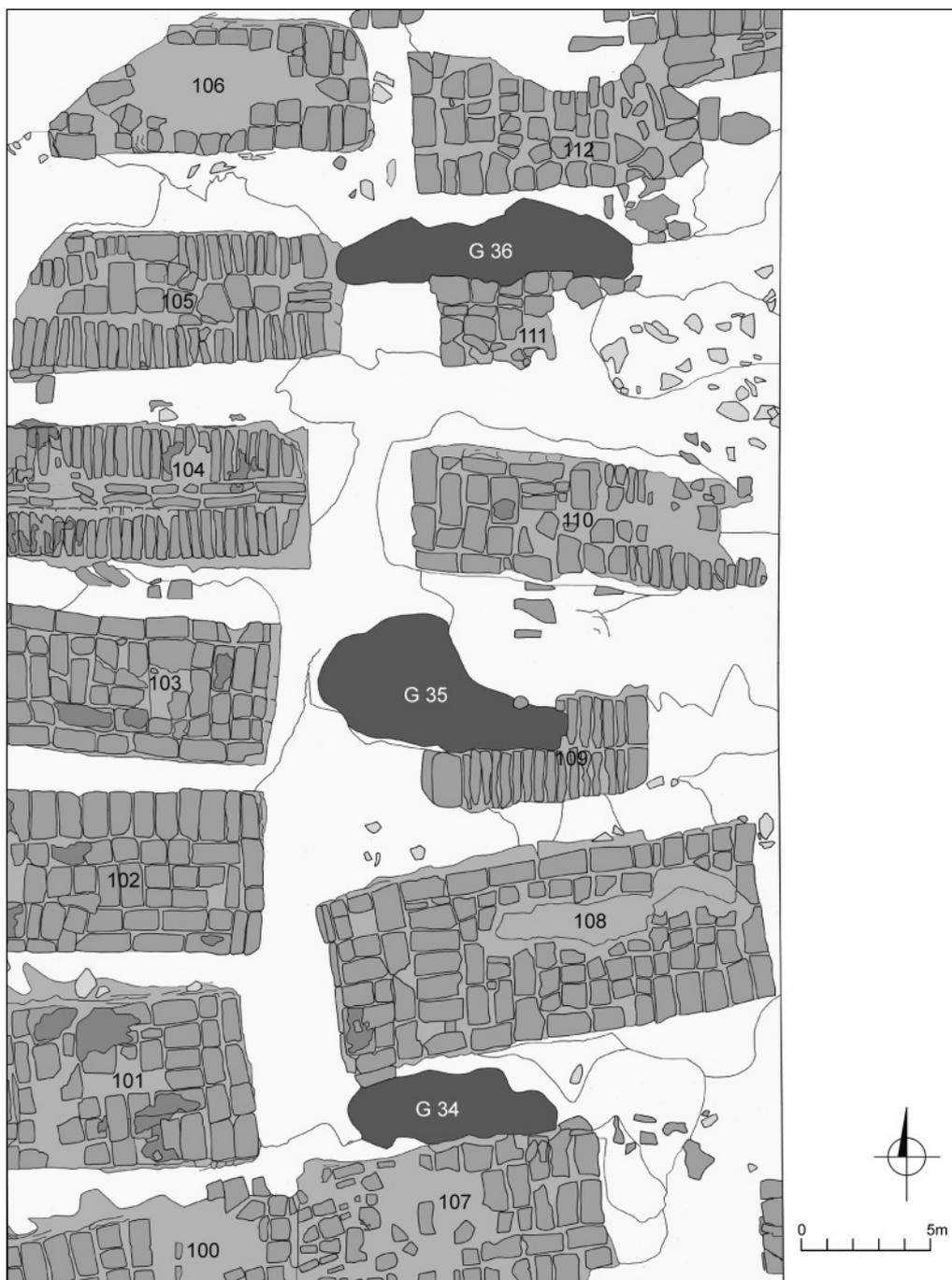


Fig. 5. Plan of graves and platform-like mud-brick features in the trial pit at Site SH9
(Drawing A. Stupko, M. Mazur)

separated by a *kbor*. It was surveyed already in December 2004 (Chłodnicki and Żurawski 2005, 380, 382); at the time, about 100 stone superstructures of box grave type were registered along with a sparse scatter of Classic Christian ceramics.

The burial field has now been found to occupy an area of about 1300 m² (65 m from east to west and 50 m from north to south).² It comprises 91 box graves, 67 of which form three separate groups [Fig. 4]: 11 graves (G1-G11) in the southwestern part of the site and 32 graves (G12-G43) in the southern part, the two divided by a local road that follows the course of the Nile without disturbing any of the graves, and 24 graves (G67-G91) in the southeastern part. The remaining graves are scattered irregularly in the western part of the site and on higher ground at the western edge of the wadi, where some may have actually been destroyed by water erosion.

A trial pit 10 by 6 m was opened to clear the graves visible on the ground (in preparation for more work in the coming season). Thirteen platform-like mud-brick features were uncovered, all oriented east-west, in two rows within the limits of the trench (the excavators estimated their number at possibly exceeding 400 in the cemetery as a whole) [Fig. 5]. These structures were spaced an average of c. 0.30-0.40 m, except for the vicinity of the three recognized graves, where they stood further apart. They were made of mud bricks measuring 0.38-0.40 x 0.19-0.20 x 0.07-0.08 m, no more than three courses in

any single case. The bricks were laid either on the flat side (nos 100, 102, 103, 106, 107, 108, 110, 111, 112) or on edge (nos 104, 105 and 109). If laid on edge, the bricks were commonly arranged into the “spine-and-ribs” pattern with a central spine along the longer axis of the grave flanked by bricks laid at right angle to it (Adams 1998: 22). Faint traces of lime mortar do not provide a firm basis to argue that these structures were ever plastered.

The structures appear to have been built at the same time as the graves, as indicated by the position of graves G34 and G36 between them. G35, however, is partly under a brick structure, hence it should perhaps be considered as of earlier date.

Similar features have been noted on the Lower Nubian sites of Arminna (Junker 1925: Pl. XV, upper row), Soba (Welsby, Daniels 1991: 121-123, Fig. 55), where they also appeared between the graves, and Kulubnarti, where they covered the graves (Adams 1999: 16, 43-44, Pls 2:F, 6:E and F). Many Early Christian graves of this type, all marked on surface by a solid rectangular paving of mud bricks laid on edge, some covered with white plaster, were found during survey on the west bank of the Nile south of Faras (Adams and Nordstroem 1963: 45). At Gebel Ghaddar North they covered early Christian burials made around a Post-Meroitic tumulus (Żurawski, El-Tayeb 1994: 301-302, Fig 3, 4). In apparent contrast to the box-shaped stone superstructures that originally stood quite high, the earliest Christian inhumations in the region were

2 Fieldwork in 2006 was headed by Marek Lemiesz with the assistance of archaeologists Tomasz Stepnik, Anastazja Stupko and Mariola Orzechowska, physical anthropologist Karol Piasecki (University of Szczecin), geodesist Wiesław Małkowski (University of Warsaw, Institute of Archaeology), as well as students of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań Marta Mazur (who contributed remarks to the present report), Paweł Polkowski and Alicja Płaskowska.



Fig. 6. *Early Christian bowl*
(Photo M. Lemiesz)

covered with flat mud-brick structures which densely covered the area of a burial ground. Box graves were introduced wherever possible in the gaps between the platforms at a later date. Nevertheless some of the brick pavements might have been also superimposed with stone superstructures. In some cases, these superstructures missed considerably the burial trench they were supposed to cover. However, such axis deflation and even misplacements between the shaft and the superstructure occur frequently in Christian cemeteries in Nubia (cf. Vila 1984: 187).

Only two sepulchers (SH9/G34 and SH9/G35) were explored down to the burial chamber. SH9/G34, seriously damaged, was provided with a sub-rectangular box, 1.85 m long, up to 0.90 m wide, maximum height 0.50 m. The stones of this structure were medium-sized and elongated, the spaces between the bigger stones filled with rock detritus.

Its subterranean part qualifies it as a bottom-niche grave (Adams 1998: 26, Fig. 8.c). The oval pit (1.52 m long, 0.65 m wide and 0.80 m deep) was dug in sandy ground and five big slabs were laid flat across it, the sixth standing vertically at the northern end. The skeleton was that of a child (6-8 years old), found in anatomical order, laid on its back with arms along the sides and slightly flexed legs, the head pointing to the west. No grave goods were found, but there was a petrified animal bone and a shell in the western end of the pit.

SH9-G35 was a superstructured grave with a well preserved subrectangular box (2.30 m long, 1.05 m wide and 0.33 m high) made of two courses of big stones, the inside filled with sand and gravel. Beneath was an irregular, oblong pit (2.02 m long, 0.64 m wide and 1.20 m deep). The skeleton of a female about 22-25 years old lay in shallow side-niche cut along the north wall of the pit (cf. Adams 1998: 26, Fig. 8.b). The body had been buried on its back, head pointing roughly to the west, arms crossed on the pubis. The head and the upper part of the body had been covered with a huge flat stone slab (1.29 m long) placed at an angle by the northern side of the chamber. There were no grave goods.

The very early Christian date of SH9 mud brick pavements was confirmed by the sparse scatter of diagnostic pottery found among the graves. On the strength of analogy from the Dongolese kilns, a substantial fragment of a red-slipped bowl decorated with a cross motif, found among the bricks making up the structure numbered 110, can be dated to the 6th-7th century (Pluskota 1990: 35 and 39, Figs 10-12) [Fig. 6].

TUMULUS FIELD AT SITE SH10

The tumulus cemetery SH10 borders on the burial ground of SH9 and indeed the two could be taken as one, considering that some of the box graves were found already among the tumuli.³ Altogether there are 13 mounds on SH10, grouped in three distinct concentrations. Group A made up of five tumuli (T1-T5) is located more or less at the foot of the *gebel*, group B, also five tumuli (T6-T10), alongside a local route and the *gebel*, and finally, group C (T11-T13) on a gravelly plateau raised above a wide *khôr* on the northern peripheries of the graveyard. SH10/T1 and the adjacent small SH10/T2, both apparently relatively undisturbed, were selected for archaeological exploration in February 2006.

The ground was cleared and the southern part of the mound of the medium-sized tumulus T1 was explored. The mound was clad with small and medium-sized stones, mixed with pebbles. Beneath it, a trapezoidal shaft with slightly inclined sides and rounded corners, oriented roughly NE-SW, was dug straight down into the rocky alluvial ground to a depth of 1.20 m. It was filled with gravel, silt and pebbles. The bottom was paved with flat slabs. The burial chamber was roughly oval (1.40 x 0.63 m, 0.40 m high) and was dug in the northwestern side of the shaft. The skeleton of a male in his fifties was found in contracted position on the right side with head to the south facing east, arms

bent and legs flexed. A huge stone slab, 0.45 m long, had been placed intentionally in an effort to weigh down the body. Shreds of textiles found with the bones featured narrow parallel red and yellow stripes. Neither beads nor other grave goods were found in the burial chamber and entrance shaft.

Offering pits, 0.40 m in diameter, were found outside the original perimeter of the tumulus. They contained organic matter, fragmented animal bones, seeds, and ashes, as well as some pottery (representing a post-Meroitic repertoire), intentionally sealed with a compact layer of big stones and gravel.

The smaller satellite tumulus T2 (2.60 m in diameter, 0.45 m high) had a mound consisting of huge, irregular stone blocks mixed with smaller stones and pebbles in the core, covered on the surface with small stones and pebbles. A vertical shaft filled with stones gave access to the burial pit of irregular shape cut at the bottom. A disarticulated skeleton of a child was found, plausibly buried originally in contracted position on the right side, with the head to the southwest, facing east. A string of ostrich-egg shell beads and a necklace of sun-dried clay beads was found around the arms, head and hips. Close to the neck a string of five spherical beads made of glass paste was found, and a hemispherical dark-red, polished bowl was collected from near the head.

3 The site was preliminarily investigated in the course of the 2004 survey of Shemkhiya (Chłodnicki and Żurawski 2005: 380). Regular excavations lasted from 26 February to 13 March, the field staff being headed by Edyta Klimaszewska-Drabot and consisting of Anastazja Stupko, Mariola Orzechowska and Martyna Mazur. The site was surveyed by geodesist Wiesław Małkowski.

SHEMKHIYA FORTRESS SH8

The dead buried on SH9 and SH10 came from a community living in the shadow of a hilltop fortress dominating the left bank of the river and the fertile hinterland. A detailed two-week architectural and archaeological survey of the SH8 fortifications and *intra muros* structures was completed by T. Stępnik in late February. Clearing of the enclosure wall and limited archaeological testing facilitated a reconstruction of the architectural history of the feature.

The layout of the fortress follows the bipartite scheme of other forts in the Shemkhiya region and downriver with an upper castle in the centre of the lower ramparts, but with none of the poterns, corner towers and semicircular towers, etc., present in most Middle Nile fortifications. Not much has survived of the original structure raised, as suggested by the ceramic evidence, at the onset of the Christian period [Fig. 7]. The earliest part was probably a section of the wall made of bricks bonded with lime plaster raised above the highest flooding level. It was here that a river gate plausibly existed, serving to raise goods from boats anchored in the deep waters at the bottom of an almost vertical wall. Loopholes for firearms concentrated

around the gates and in the most vulnerable parts of the wall (although with seemingly poor range and visibility) date to a later rebuilding of the fortress.

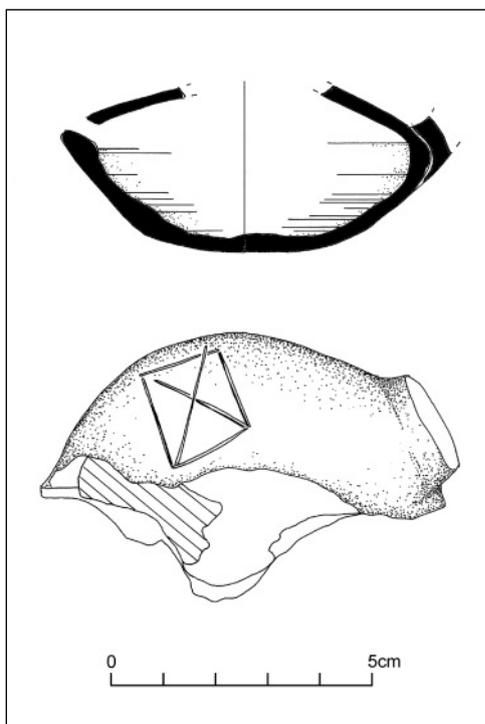


Fig. 7. Fragment of an Early Christian lamp (Drawing M. Orzechowska)

SURVEY BETWEEN SHEMKHIYA AND TANTA ISLAND

Tanta Island was the northernmost point surveyed in 2006 [Fig. 8]. It was measured and surveyed, revealing no evidence of any activity before the 17th century or later. Local oral tradition links the fortress with the gold trade.

The region between Shemkhiya and Tanta was also surveyed for rock art, rock gongs and prehistoric sites, registering one hundred sites in all (68 rock art sites, 25 cemeteries or single burials, five abandoned settlements and two rock

gongs). Gebel el-Gurgurib, on both sides of the khor that joins the Nile near el-Tina village, turned out to be exceptionally rich in representations, a total of 436 being

registered. These are reported on in some detail in separate contributions by K. Piasecki and E. Kuciewicz in this volume.

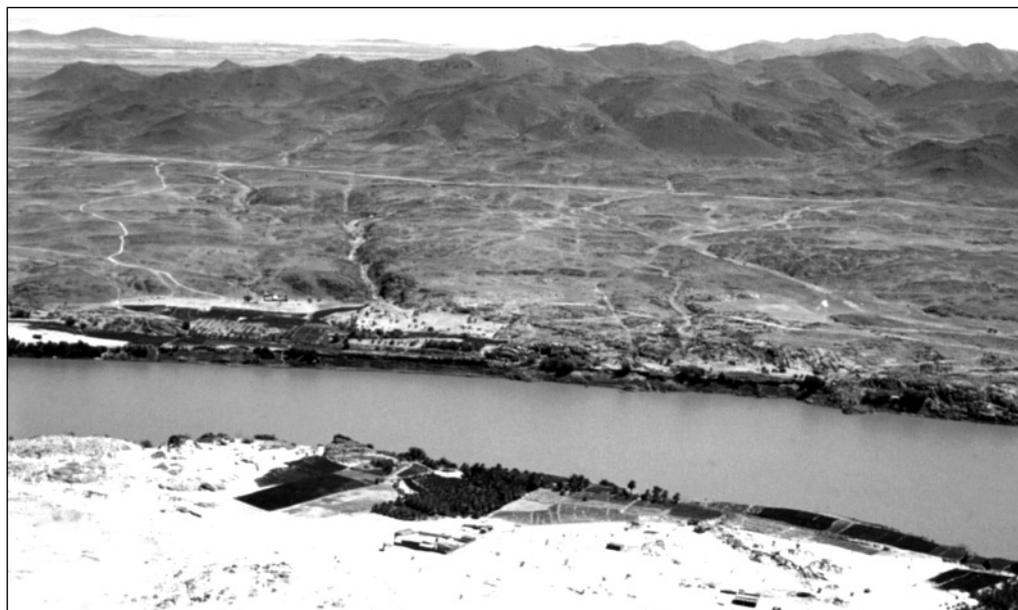


Fig. 8. Left-bank Shemkhiya region upriver from Tanta Island (the island with the fortress seen on the right) with Gebel el-Gurgurib in the background. February 2003 (Photo B. Żurawski)

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