

THE EL-AR P1 CEMETERY (FOURTH CATARACT, SUDAN)

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with an appendix by Joachim Śliwa

The field survey in November and December 2007 in the area of the PCMA concession on the Fourth Nile Cataract concentrated in the area around the village of El-Ar. Site P1 was discovered in the immediate vicinity of the settlement. It is situated at the edge of the high desert, occupying a spit of land between khors, overlooking the river [Fig. 1]. The

survey identified stone structures which were presumed to be graves, as it turned out, correctly. The surface pottery collection was attributed to the following chronological periods: Neolithic, Old Kush (Kerma Culture) (Kołosowska *et alii* 2003: 21–25) and Late Meroitic. Evidence of recent activities preparing the ground under house



Fig. 1. *The El-Ar P1 site before excavation*
(Photo M. Jawornicki)

construction and threat of destruction prompted the decision to carry out salvage excavations. Investigations were undertaken from 23 November to 14 December 2007.¹

An area of 2 ares was investigated, locating altogether ten graves, all with stone superstructures that were revealed once the ground surface was swept.

THE GRAVES

The first of the graves (El-Ar P1/1) had conical superstructure made of stones. The body of a male was deposited in strongly contracted position, on the left side with head to the east and facing south. The grave furnishings included two ceramic vessels, iron arrowheads and a collection of faience, glass and stone beads. The grave was dated by the pottery to the Late Meroitic period. Vessels of a similar type were uncovered at the Hagar El-Beida 2 site, which is just a few dozen kilometers away from El-Ar (explored in 2005 by a Polish expedition, cf. Longa 2007; 2008).

The remaining nine tombs represented a single type, which consisted of an oval superstructure comprising an outer kerb of relatively large boulders and concentric rings of smaller stones inside. This kind of superstructure is flat and its outer ring marks the perimeter of the grave pit. All the burial chambers were shallow rock-cut pits of relatively large diameter. In six cases there was an additional stone ring inside the grave pit.

Grave 2 (El-Ar P1/2) marks the northern boundary of the cemetery. The burial pit was surrounded by large stone blocks on the surface. The body was laid out on the left side, the head to the east and facing south.

The legs were flexed, the right arm bent at the elbow, the left extended alongside the body with the palm of the hand between the thighs. The bottom of the burial chamber was sprinkled with red ocher. There were no grave goods to be found.

The next grave to the south, El-Ar P1/3, had an additional stone ring inside the burial chamber, placed partly on top of the skeleton and grave goods. The body of a male had been laid out on the right side with the head to the north and looking west. The knees were bent. An offering of a whole sheep was found inside the grave. The bones of the animal lay in the western part of the grave, immediately next to the buried person, the head of the animal between the man's hands. A large blacktop ceramic vase with impressed ornament was found next to the skull.

Clearing of the superstructure of the next grave (El-Ar P1/4) revealed a small blacktop bowl placed between the stone rings. An oval grave pit had an inner stone ring which encircled the skeleton and the grave goods. The skeleton of a man was laid on the left side, aligned NE–SW, legs flexed. The arms were bent at the elbows and the hands raised to the face. A sheep offering lay to the north of the body. Three ceramic vessels stood in the northwestern part of the grave [*Fig. 2*]. One of the vessels is an Egyptian import. The vessel belongs to the Elephantine Pink ware group, produced in Egypt in the second half of the Twelfth or in the beginnings of the Thirteenth Dynasty. A bracelet of small blue faience beads was found on the right wrist. A layer of red ocher covered the bottom of the tomb; traces of ocher were also found on the bones of both man and animal,

1 The site was explored by a team comprising archaeologists Anna Longa, Ewa Kuciewicz, Agata Drejer, Artur Buszek, photographer Maciej Jawornicki and NCAM inspector Musa El-Fadul Abdalla El-Tayeb. Anthropological examination of the bones was carried out on site by Prof. Karol Piasecki, the faunal remains were examined by Dr. Renata Ablamowicz, and the pottery was identified by Dr. Teodozja I. Rzeuska.



Fig. 2. Grave pit of El-Ar P1/4
(Photo M. Jawornicki)

indicating that the bodies had been sprinkled or painted with it during the funeral.

Feature El-Ar P1/5 had only the outer ring of stones and was empty.

The grave in the eastern part of the investigated area (El-Ar P1/6) had a low stone superstructure covering a pit with a child's burial. The body was aligned E-W and was encircled by an additional stone ring inside the pit.

An adult individual was buried in the next tomb (El-Ar P1/7). The body was encircled with an additional stone ring inside the grave pit [Fig. 3]. The alignment was N-S, head to the north facing west. The position of the body was slightly constricted with legs flexed at the knees. The left arm bent at the elbow was positioned at pelvic level, the right arm, extended, lay alongside the body with the hand inserted between the



Fig. 3. Grave pit El-Ar P1/7 during exploration
(Photo M. Jawornicki)

thighs. Two bead bracelets were found by the feet. The beads on one string were made of blue-colored faience, those on the other of ostrich eggshell. A cylindrical stone pendant was discovered next to the upper part of the skeleton.

The small superstructure of grave 8 (El-Ar P1/8) marked the burial of a child [Fig. 4]. The body was encircled by an extra stone ring inside the grave pit [Fig. 5]. It lay on its left side, aligned E–W, the head to the east and facing north. The position was constricted with bent legs. The left arm lay alongside the body with the hand flush with the knees. The right arm was bent at the elbow, the hand resting against the face. No grave furnishings were noted.

The next grave in the southern part of the investigated area (El-Ar P1/9) had a relatively large superstructure covering a large but shallow grave pit, in the southwestern part of which a child burial was discovered [Fig. 6].



Fig. 4. View of the eastern part of the site with grave El-Ar P1/8 in the foreground (Photo M. Jawornicki)



Fig. 5. Grave El-ArP1/8 during exploration (Photo M. Jawornicki)

The body was aligned N–S with the head to the south facing west. It lay in contracted position with legs bent and feet by the pelvis. Both arms were bent at the elbows, the hands resting against the face. A deep bowl with engraved wavy line running seven times around the vessel stood by the head. A necklace of ostrich-eggshell beads alternating with cylindrical faience ones was found in the section of the upper body. A bracelet of ostrich-eggshell beads and one stone bead encircled the right wrist.

The last of the graves (El-Ar P1/10) to be investigated turned out to be disturbed by plunderers, who destroyed part of the superstructure. An inner ring of stones in the grave pit covered the burial in part. Bones in the upper section of the skeleton were in disarray. The body had been deposited on its

left side, the head to the east and facing north. The arms were bent at the elbow with the hands at the face. A ceramic blacktop bowl was deposited by the head.

Stone structures of unclear function were discovered in association with graves 3, 4 and 5 (structure A), and between graves 7, 8 and 10 (structure B). They were contemporary with the burial ground. Inside the structures there were sizable collections of sherds, the pottery being typical of the Old Kush II period (El-Tayeb, Kołosowska 2003). Frequent constituents of this assemblage included thin-walled bowls with a band of engraved decoration at the widest body diameter and vessels with an ornament either just below the rim or on the bottom. Concentrations of human bones were also found in the context of these two structures.



Fig. 6. Grave El-ArP1/9 during exploration
(Photo M. Jawornicki)

In the first one (structure A) the bones were very fragmented and could be attributed probably to a single male individual. The mixed assemblage of bones in structure B belonged to at least two individuals: an adult who was most probably a female and a juvenile.

The interpretation of these structures is not easy. In the Old Kush II period structures interpreted as chapels for the cult of the dead appeared on the cemetery in Kerma. They were built of mud brick, but in earlier periods such structures could have been made of organic materials. They accompanied the burials and undoubtedly were connected with funerary rituals. Structures of this kind are known from Kerma and also from the island of Saï (Lacovara 1986; Bonnet 1990: 53-55; Geus 1991: 64; Edwards 2004: 90-91).

The rock structures from the El-Ar 1 site could be representative of chapels of this kind. They were constructed of stone material that was easily available at the site and were scaled to match the size of the associated tombs. Potsherds from inside these structures have to be considered as evidence of the rituals that took place there.

No potsherds dated to between the Old Kush and the Late Meroitic periods were discovered on the El-Ar P1 site. However, this chronological gap was filled by the discovery of an Egyptian scarab from the end of the new Kingdom or the Third Intermediate Period, from the twentieth to the twenty-fifth dynasty (c. 1200-650 BC) (see appendix by J. Śliwa below). The scarab was found between two large rock chips, next to the western wall of the funerary chapel, structure A.

CONCLUSIONS

The location of the site on a rocky eminence corresponds to that of Old Kush cemeteries known from the Fourth Cataract region on the Nile. They were often positioned on rocks, rising above the river valley (El-Tayeb, Kołosowska 2005: 4; Sip 2007). The cemetery should be considered as relatively small. The overall number of graves here probably did not exceed 20, judging by what can be seen on the ground. Individual burials are situated near to one another, occupying only the top of the eminence.

With the exception of grave 1, the remaining burials represent a similar construction type, both with regard to the superstructures and the grave pits. The body alignment reveals similarities, the most common orientations being north-south and east-west. The skeletons are usually slightly contracted, the knees flexed and

hands placed against the face or on the pelvis. The bottoms of grave pits were frequently sprinkled with red ochre. In one case the ochre was sprinkled over the bodies as well. Animal offerings in the two cases recorded in the present excavations consisted of whole animals deposited next to the burials of adult males and in both cases the arms of the man appear to have been wrapped around the animal's body. Burials with animal offerings, both whole and in parts, are known from Nubia and they are linked to the Old Kush (Kerma Culture) period (Bonnet 1980: 53; Welsby 1997: 5-7; 2001: 215-224; Chaix 1986; Chaix, Grant 1987). Explorations in the Fourth Cataract region have confirmed the occurrence of such burial practices in the Old Kush II (Middle Kerma) period (Kołosowska *et alii* 2003: 23-24; El-Tayeb, Kołosowska 2005: 53).

The grave goods at the El-Ar P1 cemetery usually comprised ceramic vessels. In the group of nine tombs from the Old Kush II period, this was commonly a single vessel placed by the head of the burial. In only one case (grave 4), four vessels were discovered, one in the context of the grave superstructure and three by the north wall of the grave pit. Two graves contained no furnishings whatsoever.

The personal adornment category from the El-Ar P1 cemetery included bead necklaces and bracelets made of faience, ostrich eggshell and stone. In a few cases the original arrangement of the beads was reconstructable. In grave 9, discoidal beads of ostrich eggshell alternated with cylindrical faience ones.

El-Ar P1 was certainly a multi-cultural site with evidence of human occupation from the Neolithic through the Late Meroitic period.

The most important period of occupation, however, was when a burial ground existed in the Old Kush II period (approx. 2050–1750 BC). Fortunately, it has suffered only marginally at the hands of grave plunderers.

A faience scarab discovered in the context of a rock structure marked yet another chronological period of occupation at the site, that is, approx. 1200–650 BC. Its placement among the rocks of the stone structure appears to have been intentional.

The latest human presence at the site is represented by the Late Meroitic burial (approx. AD 150–350).

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