

Early Makuria Research Project Excavations at Tanqasi: first season in 2018



Abstract: Tanqasi village lies on the left side of the river Nile, about 17 km downstream from Merowe city. A large tumuli field is located some kilometers southeast of the village toward the edge of the Bayuda Desert. It contains no less than 250 tumuli of various size and form of superstructure, varying from very large to very small, but only four of these have been excavated so far (three in 1953 and one in 2006). A new study program, starting in 2018 within the frame of the Early Makuria Research Project, has now explored five more tombs located in different parts of the cemetery, providing a broad chronological sequence from late to terminal Meroitic.

Keywords: Tanqasi, tumulus, cemetery, mound, late Meroe, post-Meroe, terminal Meroe, Early Makuria

The first to explore the site in 1953 was Peter Shinnie, who explored three tumuli (Shinnie 1954). This was followed by a preliminary test within the framework of the Early Makuria Research Project in 2006, when Włodzimierz Godlewski excavated one burial (Godlewski 2008). In January–February 2018, the Early Makuria Research Project launched the first season of regular excavations at Tanqasi cemetery. The objective was to study tumuli near the northern and eastern boundaries of the site to determine site chronology and possible patterns of development. Hence four tumuli (Nos 16, 23, 46 and 52) were selected in the northern part of the cemetery and one tumulus (No. 179) at the southeastern extreme of the site [Fig. 10].

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TUMULUS 16

Situated in the northern part of the site, about 200 m from the modern settlement, tumulus 16 was a rounded mound with a flat top, originally conical in shape, but disturbed by robbing. The preserved height was 0.80 m with a diameter from 17.60 m to 23 m. A ramp in the shape of a dromos was 5.70 m long and from 1.85 m wide on the east to 3.30 m on the west [Fig. 1]. This was cut into the alluvium. A fireplace was recorded at surface level on the northern side of the ramp. The depth of the descending ramp, oriented east–west, did not exceed 2.60 m [see Fig. 1]. The L-shaped chamber located on the western/southwestern side of the shaft was blocked by an L-shaped wall constructed of alternating layers of mud bricks and flat stones. The total length of the blocking wall was 2.50 m on the west and 2.10 m on the south, and part of the originally preserved wall was 1.30 m high. The wall was constructed of several rows of mud bricks and stones bonded in thick layers of mud. The chamber cut into the alluvium was approximately 2.00 m

long on the south and 4.00 m on the west, 1.10 m deep and 0.50 m high.

A robbers' hole led directly from the top of the tumulus to the blocking wall, which had been dismantled in the south-western corner. This provided access to the chamber. The fill of the chamber presented evidence of heavy plundering, as attested by a single bead being found in the fill. A complete cup was found in the robbers' hole. Exploration of this chamber was hindered by a hard earth fill in the robbers' hole. It appears that the fill accumulated when the ramp and chamber were left uncovered. Human bones were located in the southern part of the chamber in the immediate vicinity of the blocking wall. These bones were badly preserved and, due to the structure of the fill, were excavated in chunks of alluvium that were water-sieved and analysed. A skull was located in the northern part of the concentration of bones, but due to heavy fragmentation and dispersion, this was most likely not the original position.

TUMULUS 23

Tumulus 23, situated in the northern part of the site, was a rounded mound with a flat top, originally conical in shape, but disturbed by robbing. Its height did not exceed 0.35 m, with a diameter from 17.40 m to 18.30 m. A ramp in the shape of a dromos with heavily eroded steps was 2.50 m long and from 1.10 m wide on the south-east to 1.90 m on the northwest [Fig. 2]. This ramp was cut into the alluvium. The depth of the descending ramp, oriented

east–west, did not exceed 1.25 m. On the north side of the ramp, a fireplace was recorded at surface level. The kidney-shaped chamber located on the northwestern side of the shaft was closed with a blocking wall constructed of 11 layers of mud bricks. The dimensions of the blocking wall were 1.90 m by 0.75 m [Fig. 3]. The chamber was cut into the alluvium. Its dimensions are difficult to assess due to the poor state of preservation. It measured approximately

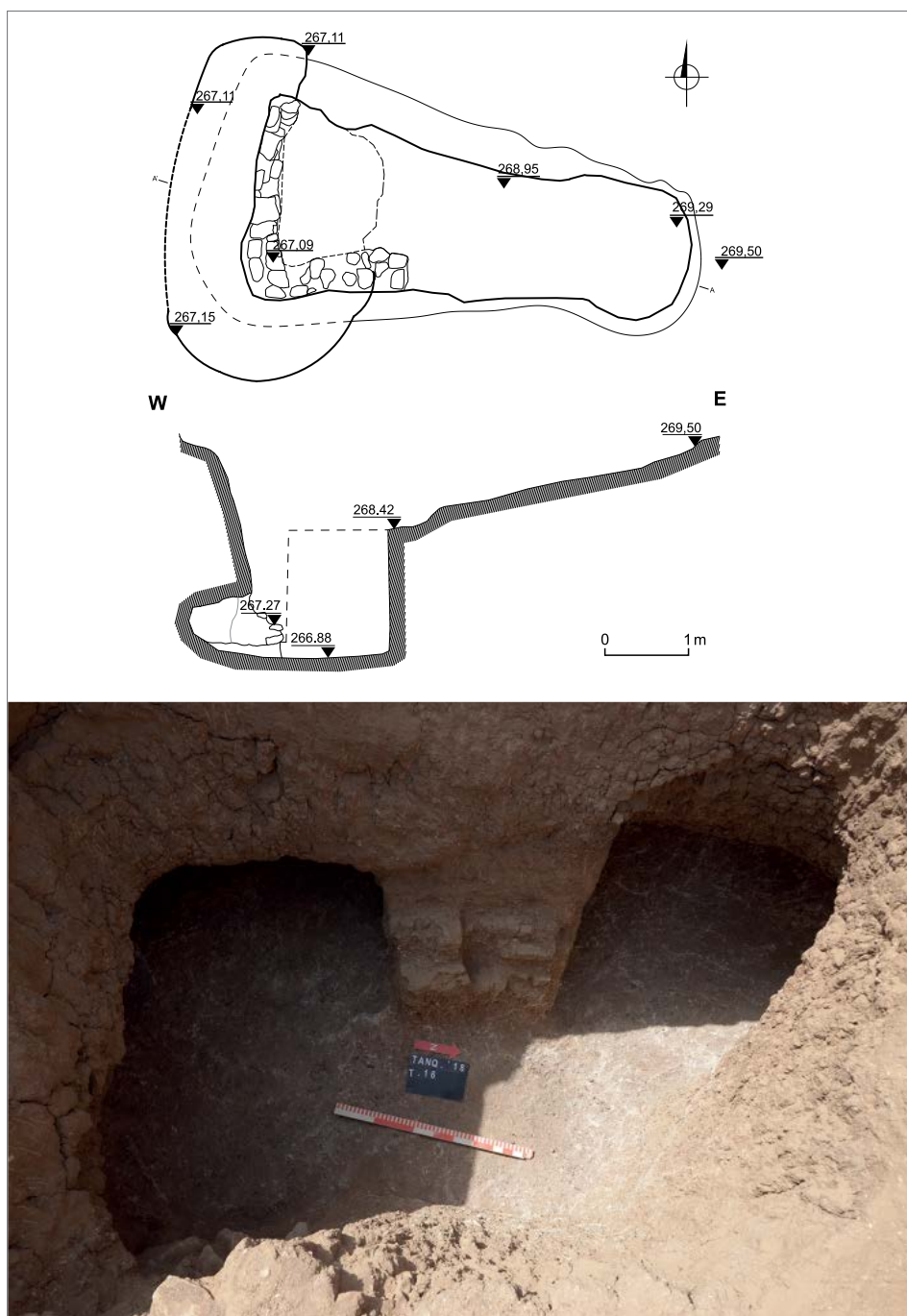


Fig. 1. Tumulus 16: top, plan at ground level and at the bottom of the shaft and E–W section looking north; bottom, entrance to the chamber (EMRP PCMA UW/drawing M. Antos, E. Czyżewska-Zalewska, photo M. Wyżgoł)

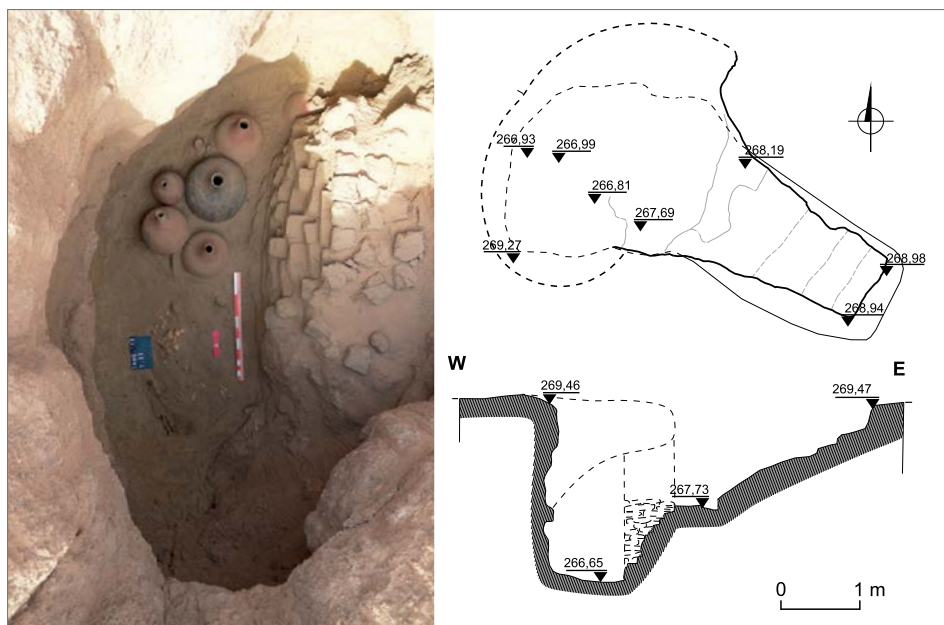


Fig. 2. Tumulus 23: left, top view of the burial in the chamber; right, plan at ground level and at the bottom of the shaft and E–W section looking north (EMRP PCMA UW/drawing M. Antos, E. Czyżewska-Zalewska, photo M. Wyżgoł)



Fig. 3. Tumulus 23: blocking wall, view from the west (EMRP PCMA UW/photo M. Wyżgoł)



Fig. 4. Tumulus 23: grave goods in the burial chamber; findspot of the metal artifacts circled in white (EMRP PCMA UW/photo M. Wyżgoł)

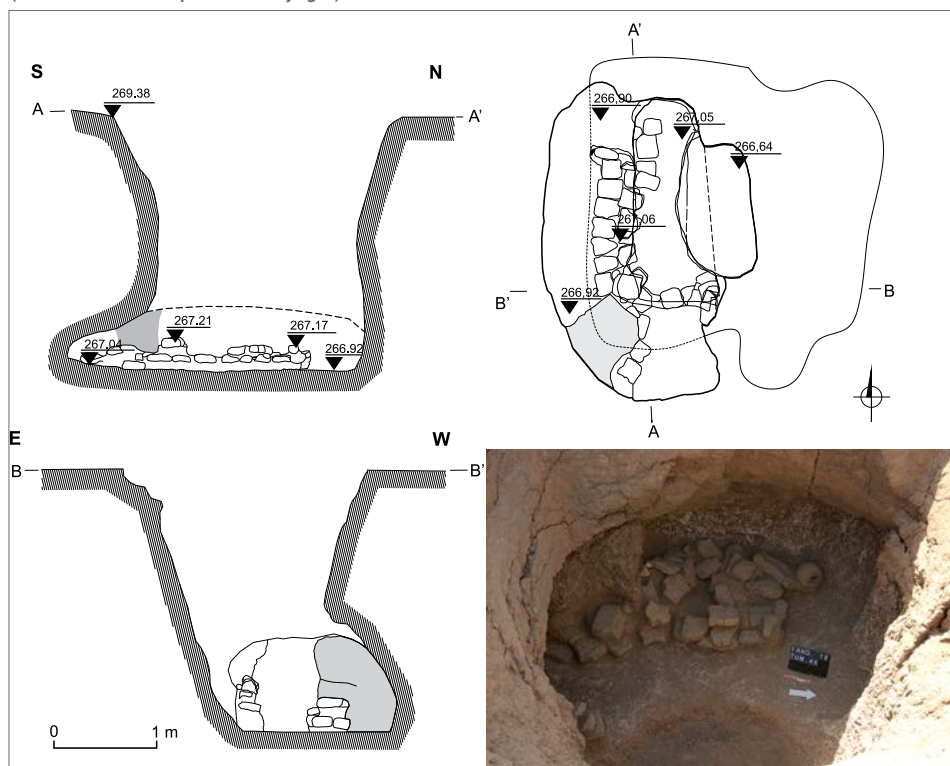


Fig. 5. Tumulus 46: top right, plan at bottom level; top left, N–S section looking west onto the burial chamber; bottom left, E–W section looking south onto the southern part of the burial chamber; bottom right, west blocking wall and burial chamber (EMRP PCMA UW/drawing M. Antos, E. Czyżewska-Zalewska, photo M. Wyżgoł)

2.50 m in length on the SE–NW axis and 4.00 m on the NE–SW axis.

A robbers' hole led directly from the top of the tumulus to the chamber, breaching the chamber and part of the blocking wall. Although the chamber had been penetrated by robbers, a significant amount of grave goods remained intact. In the northeastern part of the chamber, seven vessels, including bottles and beer jars, were recorded [Fig. 4]. These vessels were most probably placed on an organic mat, which is evidenced by the coloration of the ground. In the southwestern part of the chamber, disarticulated human bones were also record-

ed on an organic mat. A skull was found in the southern part of the chamber pointing south. Sex was preliminarily estimated in the field before extraction of the pelvis and the morphological features suggest a male. North–south oriented iron arrowheads and a spearhead [marked location in Fig. 4] were placed along the scattered bones on their southwestern side, and traces of decayed shafts were also observed. A copper-alloy bowl was found to the east of the skeleton and adjacent to another beer jar and a bottle. Over 300 beads were found in the fill covering the bones, originally having adorned the deceased.

TUMULUS 46

Situated in the northern part of the site, tumulus 46 was a rounded mound with a flat top, originally conical in shape but also disturbed by robbers' activity. The preserved height was 0.60 m with a diameter

of approximately 15 m. A rectangular vertical shaft measured approximately 2.80 m by 2.50 m, narrowing towards the bottom reached at a depth of 2.60 m [Fig. 5 left]. The L-shaped chamber located in the western/



Fig. 6. Tumulus 46: articulated skeletal remains *in situ* (EMRP PCMA UW/photo M. Wyżgoł)

southern side of the tomb was blocked by an L-shaped blocking wall constructed of layers of mud bricks [Fig. 5 bottom right]. The chamber was cut into the alluvium and was 2.10 m long on the western side and 1.00 m on the southern side, with a height of approximately 0.60 m.

A robbers' hole led directly through the original shaft to the blocking wall, which had been partly dismantled and the bricks were thrown along the eastern edge of this hole. The dismantled western and southern part of the blocking wall suggests that both parts were penetrated by robbers. Despite having been plundered, some of

the original grave goods were preserved, mainly a jar and almost 200 beads, as well as copper-alloy jewellery, e.g., a ring was found on a finger-bone. The human bones were well preserved but disarticulated. The skeleton was partly covered with a collapsed blocking wall, and part of the bones were intermixed with bricks. The upper limbs and the head oriented south were most probably preserved in anatomical order [Fig. 6]. Discarded limbs, the bones still articulated, suggest that the burial had been plundered soon after the funeral, before the soft tissues had decayed.

TUMULUS 52

Situated in the northern part of the site, tumulus 52 was a circular mound with a flat top. The diameter ranged from 19 to 21 m, the preserved height being about 0.50 m (the diameter of the stone circle on top was 11.70 m). A shaft cut into the alluvium was most probably vertical and

rectangular. However, it was in a poor state of preservation due to robbing as well as rainwater and wind erosion. Only the east wall was recorded during the excavation. The burial chamber appears to have been robbed and/or destroyed by natural factors.



Fig. 7. Tumulus 179: view of the shaft with human bones and a bowl (EMRP PCMA UW/photo M. Wyżgoł)

TUMULUS 179

Tumulus 179, located in the southeastern part of the site, is a rounded mound with a flat top. It was apparently conical in shape, but was flattened on top as a result of plundering. The mound is from 13.00 m to 15.80 m in diameter and preserved to no more than 0.70 m in height.

A roughly circular vertical shaft was dug about 1.40 m into the sandy geological structure; it measures from 1.16 m on the SW–NE axis to 1.66 m on the NW–SE axis [Fig. 8]. A fireplace was recorded at surface level on the northern side of the shaft. A lateral niche was cut in the

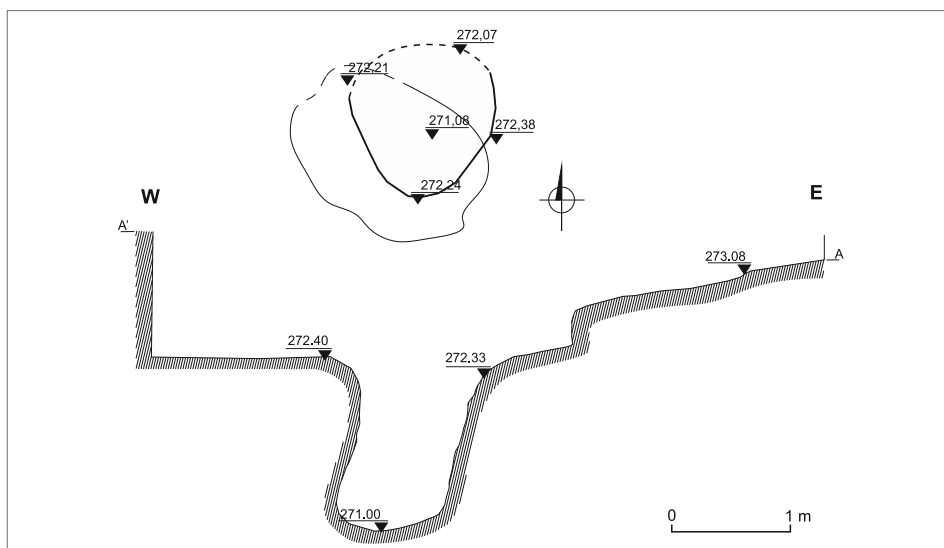


Fig. 8. Tumulus 179: top, plan showing shaft opening in outline superimposed on the plan of the bottom; bottom, E–W section looking north (EMRP PCMA UW/drawing M. Antos, E. Czyżewska-Zalewska)



Fig. 9. Tumulus 179: skeletal remains (EMRP PCMA UW/photo M. Wyżgoł)

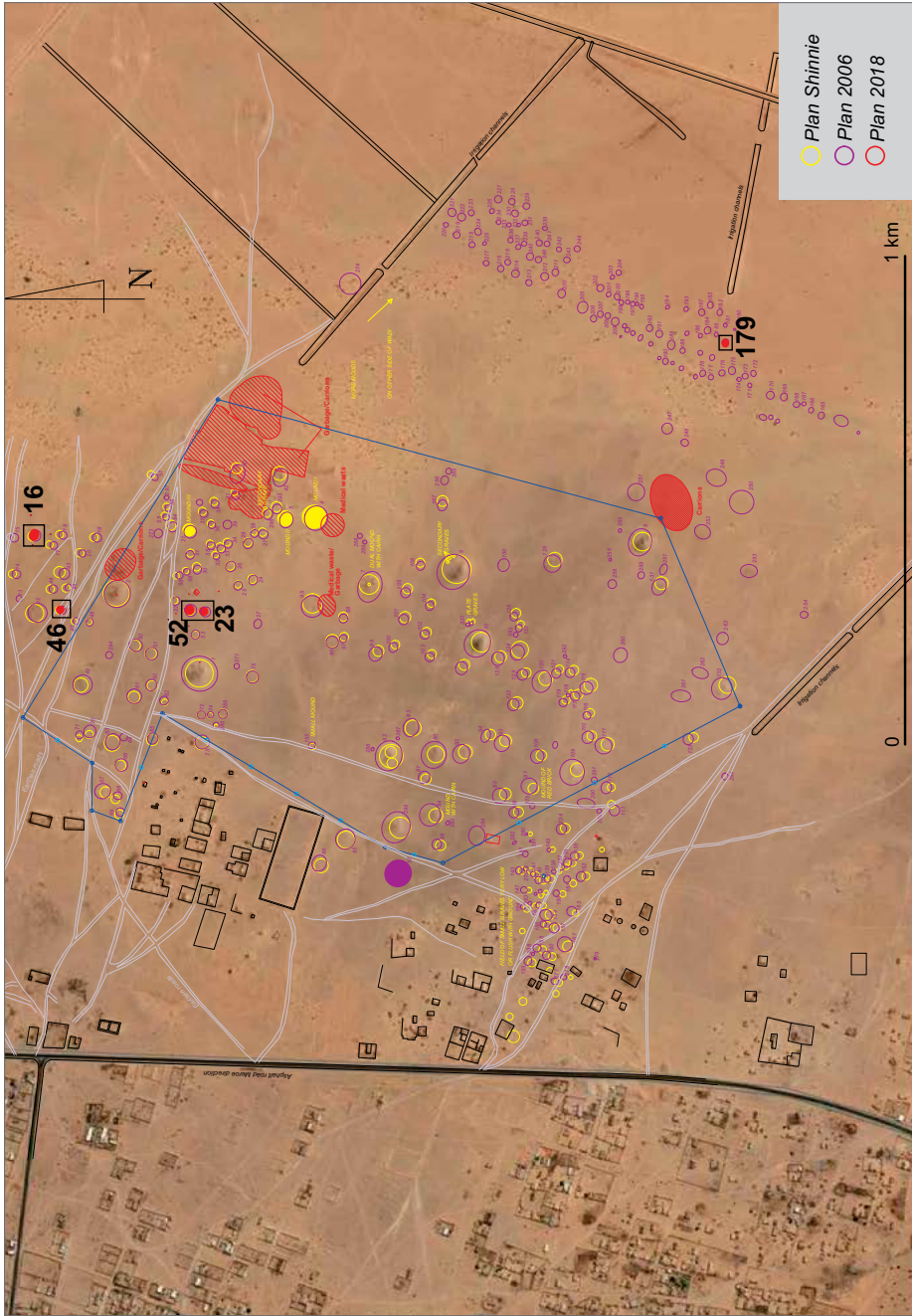


Fig. 10. Plan of the Tanqasi site (EMRP PCMA UW/drawing M. Antos)

southwestern side of the shaft and was 0.45 m deep.

A robbers' hole led directly through the original shaft to the niche. The grave goods including a bowl and beads were scattered within the fill of the shaft, suggesting heavy plundering [Fig. 7]. The recorded human remains were not in anatomical order and were spread out on the bottom of the burial shaft including the

niche. A concentrated bone assemblage appeared on the southernmost side, the bones here lying aligned E–W [Fig. 9]. The state of preservation was very good. The skull was intact and was located to the west of the concentrated bone assemblage. A preliminary examination of the morphological features of the pelvis before extracting it from the ground suggested a female individual.

REMARKS AND COMMENTS

As said above, prior to 2018 there were two excavation seasons: in 1953 and in 2006. Yet the first explorations of this site go back to the first half of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century. Shinnie (1954: 66) states that “the group of mounds at Tanqasi, wrongly placed and wrongly described ‘pyramids’ on map sheet 45-F of the 1/250,000 series of the Sudan, have given rise to much speculation. They have been accepted as burial mounds by visitors but their date has never been satisfactorily determined. First mentioned by Lepsius who made a plan of them [*Denkmäler* I, 124 and *Text* V: 255–256], they were visited by Budge [*Egyptian Sudan*, Vol. I: 122] and Reisner [*JEA* V: 67]. The latter made a cut into one of them, apparently without results. It was Reisner who pointed out that these mounds were not pyramids, but circular grave-tumuli composed of earth held in place by an outer layer of small rough stones. He believed them to be of a late Meroitic date at the earliest”.

Having in mind Shinnie's points therefore, a comprehensive study program for this long-forgotten tumuli field

has been planned. In 2018, the Early Makuria Research Program launched its first season of fieldwork, choosing five burials located in different parts of the cemetery [Fig. 10]. The results of this limited exploration test revealed that these burials fell into three different groups, based mainly on the construction of their substructures.

Tumuli 16 and 23 represent the first group [see Figs 1–4]. The substructures of this group are of conical shape, descending ramp, oriented east–west, with a burial chamber cut perpendicularly to it on the west side of the ramp. Note that this method of burial construction was known in the Central Nile Valley as early as the Meroitic period. It was also practiced in the region of the Fourth Nile Cataract during the second phase of the “Terminal Meroe” period (post-Meroe, about AD 450–550), although occasionally with some modifications (see Lenoble 1987: Pls I, VIII, IX, X, XI, XII; El-Tayeb and Kołosowska 2007). Burial arrangement in the Central Nile Region seems to be organized according to a well-established burial practice. The body was

always buried in a contracted or flexed position, aligned north–south or east–west. Head orientation and face direction do not seem to follow a strict rule, for the head was sometimes oriented north or south. Differences in body orientation might have stemmed from the regional peculiarity of each population group. Moreover, the body lay either on its left or right side, often on an arrangement of a mat, pure sand or even just mud signifying a bed (Geus 1982: 181, Fig. 4; El-Tayeb and Gar El-Nabi 1998). A few inhumations were laid on an actual bed, or a wooden bench or frame (Lenoble et al. 1994: Pls 7, 9, 10; Mallinson 1994: 21; El-Tayeb 1994: 66, 69, 70; Edwards 1998: 11–60).

The second group of burials comprised tumuli 46 and 52 [see *Figs 5, 6*]. The principal rule for this type of burials is that they were usually composed of a rectangular vertical shaft provided with a single chamber hewn into one of the shaft walls, thus designated as a lateral burial. Lateral burials are the dominant type across the Dongola Reach, where this type was first discovered at the Jebel Gaddar southern cemetery and was noted thereafter in various versions. It was also recorded in some cases in the Lower Nubia region. However, until today it has never been observed above the Fifth Nile Cataract (see El-Tayeb 1994: 65–67, 69, Fig. 1, Pl. 2, Fig. 3; 2002: 70–72). It is worth mentioning that Tumulus 46 is provided with an L-shaped burial chamber, a version which appeared in this region in the late phase of the “Terminal Meroe” period about AD 350–450 and was first discovered at the cemetery of el-Kassinger Bah-

ry in the Fourth Nile Cataract Region (see Kolosowska and El-Tayeb 2007). As noted above, the burial was disturbed in the past and as a result the human skeleton was found detached into two parts, upper and lower. Nonetheless, it seems that initially the occupant was located on the southern side of the burial chamber, following the canon of burial customs practiced in the Dongola Reach.

It should be mentioned that these four burials are located on a vast paleoflood plain. In consequence of natural climatic factors and the activity of robbers, the geological structure of the Nile silt became a very solid tenacious mass. This made the exploration of these burials a truly difficult task. The best example of this was the work in tumulus 52, which was found totally devastated by robbers and by falling rains, to the extent that even its real shape was impossible to determine with absolute certainty.

The last group (so far) is represented by a single burial, tumulus 179 [see *Figs 7–9*], which is located in the far north-eastern part of the cemetery, at the edge of the Bayuda semi-desert. Its superstructure has a rounded shape, with a diameter ranging from 13 m to 15 m and a preserved height of about 0.70 m. The substructure consists of a rounded vertical shaft, with a maximum depth of 1.66 m. Remains of disarticulated human skeleton were noted at the bottom of the shaft, scattered on the southwestern side. Tumulus 179 is the earliest burial among the five graves excavated this season, dated to the late Meroitic period about AD 250–350. Generally it is designated as a beehive burial, or a flask-shaped variant, a type which was found in various modified

forms. It is characteristic of the southern zone of Upper Nubia, namely the Gezira region between the Blue and White Niles, but is not that common in the regions north of Khartoum and downstream as far as Lower Nubia. However, the beehive burial type persisted in continuous use until the early phase of the “Terminal Meroitic” period about AD 350–450 (see El-Tayeb 2012: 49–52).

FIREPLACES

Fireplaces (or hearths) are rare, one reason for the rarity being possibly because such remains were easily destroyed either by grave robbers or during the course of the original burial excavation. Alternatively, they may have simply been overlooked or ignored by the excavators. Consequently, until the early 1980s no records concerning hearth burial practice had ever been made in Nubia as a whole. Even so, a fireplace was first noted at the el-Kadada cemetery in the Shendi Reach, where it was observed on the surface of the natural ground, near the edge of the descending ramp of the burial (Lenoble 1994: 95–96). Later on, with the progress of research, fireplaces were documented in the Dongola Reach in various cemetery fields such as Jebel Gaddar Southern Cemetery, el-Kassinger Bahry and Umm Gibier Island in the Fourth Nile Cataract region. A fireplace was also recently observed at the el-Zuma tumuli field (see Kołosowska and El-Tayeb 2007: 18; El-Tayeb 2012: 83–84).

During the excavations at the Tanqasi cemetery, fireplaces were recorded near three tumuli, 16, 23 and 179. In all these cases, a fireplace was noted on the ground surface level, usually near the edge of the

burial shaft, analogous to the abovementioned practice at other sites excavated in the Shendi and Dongola Reaches.

To date, the function of the fireplace is not clear and still remains a matter of conjecture. Lenoble suggests that the fireplace practice is part of what he called the “Funerary Banquet”. According to his assumption, meat was cooked and consumed during the inhumation ceremony (Lenoble 1994: 95–96). Yet the existence of fireplaces was noted adjacent to the burial chamber entrance at the bottom of the burial shaft, a practice which was first registered at T.2 in the Jebel Ghaddar Southern Cemetery as well as HP45/T.2 at el-Kassinger Bahry (El-Tayeb 1994: 66–70, Fig. 4; Kołosowska and El-Tayeb 2007: 18). At the el-Zuma cemetery, traces of fireplaces were noted in T.5 at two different locations. Firstly, on the top surface of the pier in the shaft, almost facing the southern main burial chamber, and secondly, at the bottom of the external shaft, near the entrance to the underground tunnel that leads to the main burial chamber (El-Tayeb 2010: 201). Unlike the el-Kadada find, no animal bones were found on or near the fireplace. Hence, in this case one would assume that a fire may have been lit to purify the burial chamber before depositing a dead body within. Burial purification seems to be the most feasible interpretation for the existence of hearths near or at the bottom of the shaft. It can be understood as part of the burial rite connected to the Isis libation cult, with the aim of purifying the dead and the grave as well, protecting in this way the dead and the burial from evil spirits.

GRAVE GOODS

Although all the five burials appeared to have been plundered, probably repeatedly in some cases, a number of objects in different state of preservation, which the robbers had left behind, were found. These objects comprise mainly pottery vessels (for a detailed analysis of the pottery assemblage, see Czyżewska-Zalewska 2018, in this volume), metal artifacts (see Zieliński 2018, in this volume) and collections of beads made of various natural materials (see Then-Obluska 2018, in this volume).

Tumulus 23 yielded six large intact beer jars and one small pot found on the northeastern side of the burial chamber. Five of these vessels (Tnq23/24, 25, 27, 28, 29) have a red-slipped neck and shoulder, and a globular body covered with a faded textile impression. All seem to have been produced in one workshop (see also Shinnie 1954: 75–80, Figs 8–12). Tnq23/36 is distinguished by a very characteristic type of decoration in the form of a red-slipped neck and shoulder. The globular body is covered with a textile pattern and two parallel horizontal red stripes applied just below the shoulder. A decorative rhombic shape with red-slipped sides is applied on the upper part of the body, below the red stripes, a modification which is rarely observed in this period (for the nearest parallel in date and manufacture, see Lenoble 1992: 80–90, Pls I–IV).

Another interesting jar, Tnq23/26, is a large black-ware vessel with a long neck. Its decoration is characterized by eight long vertical rows of short notches extending from under the rim downwards to the broad neck base. The handmade

black ware pottery is generally agreed to have appeared already during the early Meroitic period, especially in the Middle and Southern regions, and is presumed to have existed until the end of Meroe (about AD 550–600). It is characterized by decoration of geometrical and non-geometrical incised lines, sometimes filled with a red or white substance. Large, brown to light brown globular beer jars, decorated with a red slip and polished upper part, and the body covered with a mat-impressed or textile pattern, are dated to the first phase of “Terminal Meroe”, about AD 350–450; they underwent a long evolutionary process thereafter.

Although all the five burials were rifled to various degrees, metal artifacts, namely weaponry, were found in abundance, especially in tumulus 23. Two objects should be discussed in greater detail: a copper alloy bowl Tnq23/23 and an iron spear head Tnq23/37. Metal hemispherical bowls started to be produced in the Meroitic period, ranging from simple to more exclusive and richly decorated forms lasting through the terminal phase of Meroitic culture. It is worth mentioning that metal bowls were mainly recorded in the Middle Nile Valley and Northern province to Lower Nubia (see Lenoble et al. 1994: 53–82, Pls 12–14).

Iron spears, apparently as effective weapons, were recorded as items usually accompanying in quantity the royal dead or members of the high class elite on their last journey. Apart from their military character, they may also have been seen as royal insignia. This is best represented by the royal tumuli at Ballaṇa and Qustul in Northern Nubia, as well as Tumuli III and VI at el-Hobagi in the Shendi Reach

(Emery and Kirwan 1938; Lenoble et al. 1994: 51–88, Pls 8–10, 16, 20). Yet it should be mentioned that burials of common individuals also sometimes contained not much more than one spear, which was usually characterised by low quality of manufacture.

To conclude, the huge tumuli field of Tanqasi contains no less than 250 burials that are still visible on the surface, but only a small number of them have been excavated archaeologically. The results

of the burials excavated from 1953 to the present day, although quite modest (only nine tombs) have demonstrated a broad chronological range of the cemetery, beginning from the late Meroitic, around the end of the 3rd century AD, until the second phase of the “Terminal Meroe” period about AD 500–550. The progress of work on this significant necropolis in the future is expected to shed more light on its nature, precise date and history.

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