



Mahmoud Suliman Bashir and Julie Anderson

Excavations in the Meroitic Cemetery of Dangeil, Sudan

Introduction

Dangeil is a village located 12km north of the city of Berber in River Nile State. Since 2000, the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, Sudan, has been conducting archaeological excavations at Dangeil.

In the summer of 2002, a drainage ditch was dug along the main road and eastern border of the modern Wad el-Toum Islamic cemetery situated between the villages of Dangeil and el-Fereikha. Meroitic pottery jars, fragments of red brick and human bone were found in the rubble removed from this ditch and observed in its section; in fact, there were no tomb superstructures visible on the surface. It is only the digging of this ditch, as well as local testimonies attesting to the discovery of ceramic vessels when using the modern cemetery, that are responsible for the discovery of an important Meroitic cemetery, dating to between the 3rd century BC and 4th century AD, here. We named this cemetery 'WTC' after the modern Wad el-Toum cemetery.



Map showing the location of Dangeil



Skeleton in extended position

In a number of tombs where reuse was observed, the earlier skeleton was pushed to one side to make space for the later individual. In other cases, in a large number of the Dangeil tombs, the later body was buried on top of the earlier one.

Child burials were also excavated and it seems that here children were buried in the same cemetery as adults not in a separate cemetery as has been noted in other places. Children's tombs normally have a short shallow descendency and a small burial niche though in one case we found a child buried together with an adult.

Funerary Furniture

Large pottery beer jars are the most common finds in this cemetery. They are often found in a row consisting of 3 to 6 jars, located behind the blocking wall. Different types of pottery bowls are also often found in the tombs.



Pottery jars inside the burial

Red bowls, made with a ledged rim, are the most common and are usually found in the northern side of the burial in a group of 4 to 7 bowls. The finest example is of 7 bowls found attached to each other with one vessel in the middle surrounded by six on the exterior. This is a unique example found only in Dangeil thus far.

http://www.britishtmuseum.org/dangeil



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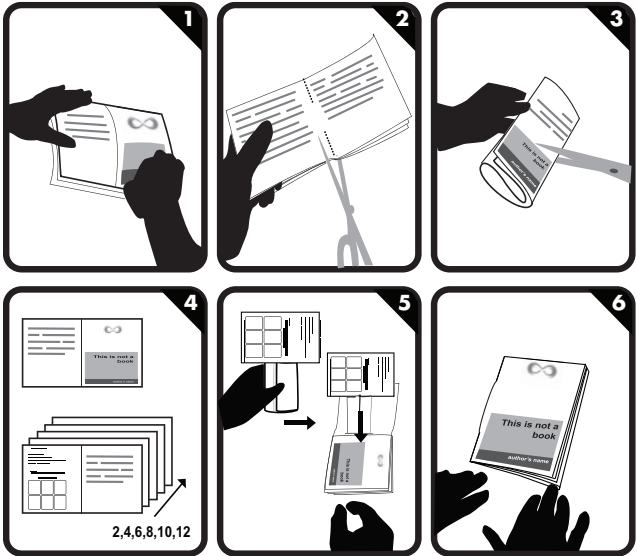


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Ammun temple at Jebel Barkal



Long before the advent and arrival of Christianity and Islam, Sudan was ruled by the Kingdom of Kush (9th century BC – 4th century AD). The Kushites worshipped the ancient Egyptian god Amun and adopted Egyptian religious and funerary practices. Jebel Barkal was the main religious centre and numerous temples dedicated to Amun were built by Kushite kings at many different sites including Kawa, Jebel Barkal, Dokki Gel, Meroe, Naqa and Dangeil.

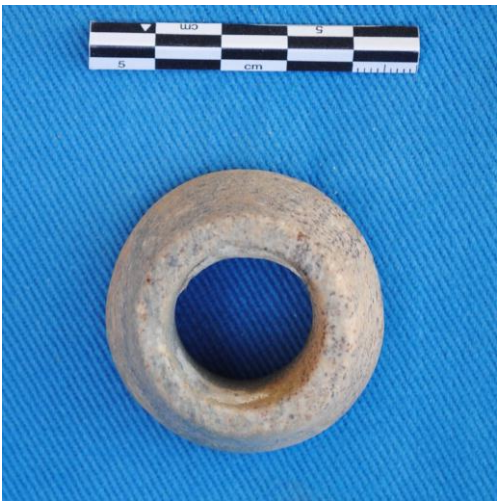


Excavations along the drainage ditch

The existence of ancient tombs in this area was generally known, because Post-Meroitic graves of the 4th and 5th century AD previously had been discovered and excavated in the northern part of this cemetery in el-Fereikha. A Meroitic offering table was also found by the local inhabitants in this area. Such offering tables were used by the ancients to offer libations and food for the dead and are associated with tombs much like tombstones are associated with modern graves.



Meroitic offering table from Faras (EA 1587)
(photograph © The British Museum)



Stone archer's ring

Archer's tomb. Note the stone archer's ring on the thumb



Statuette of a Kushite king from Tabo (SNM 24705)
Note the archer's ring on the right thumb.
(photograph Rocco Ricci © The British Museum)

Archaeological excavations in the cemetery at Dangeil are ongoing with the goal of identifying the size of the cemetery and gaining a better idea about the population of the area during the Meroitic period. Further scientific study and analyses will provide additional insights into the health, food, activities and lifestyle of the Dangeil inhabitants two thousand years ago.

The funerary traditions of the Kushites demonstrate a widespread belief in life after death. This is why goods and food usually accompanied the corpse. These items were needed to sustain and provide for the individual in the afterlife. In order to ensure that one reached the afterlife, the Kushites developed series of funerary practices that have left clear archaeological traces. These include the preparation of the dead, such as wrapping the corpse and adding personal adornments, provision of grave goods (food, drink and vessels) and the creation of a formal place of burial and burial monument. Within the burial, the orientation and position of the deceased, along with the placement of the grave goods, are features that are recorded and archaeologists trace their development and changes through time. Earlier in history, during the Kerma period (2500 BC–1500 BC), it was customary to bury the deceased on a wooden bed. Tombs with wooden beds have been found in cemeteries dating to the Kerma period in northern Sudan and to the late and Post-Meroitic periods in central Sudan. Nowadays wooden beds are used to transfer the deceased to the cemetery. This modern burial tradition has its roots in ancient Sudanese burial practices.

The lion god Apedemak. Lion Temple at Naqa.



During the latter phase of the Kushite kingdom (3rd century BC – 4th century AD), often referred to as the Meroitic period, the empire's focus shifted southwards and the city of Meroe (Begrabiya) gained in importance. The royal burial ground was moved there and it may have become the primary royal residence. Meroitic culture displayed a rich combination of Egyptian, Greco-Roman and indigenous African traits and during this phase, the local lion god Apedemak emerged as one of the most important of the Kushite gods. Temples to Apedemak were built at Musawwarat es-Sufra, Naqa, Meroe, and in other places in the Butana.



The ram-headed god Amun (SNM 1844)
(photograph Rocco Ricci © Sudan National Museum)

Archaeologists consider cemeteries to be among the most important sites because they provide information about the lives of people who died thousands of years ago. Learning about past human activity by studying the remains that were left behind is the main goal of archaeology. Studying the dead can be difficult, but through the study of bones, the age and sex of an individual as well as ancient diseases and traumas can be identified. The physical anthropological study of bones and the archaeobotanical analyses of floral remains provide information about ancient types of foods, cooking methods and the types of work and activities in which people were

Royal cemetery at Meroe: North pyramid field



The Kushites buried their kings and queens in rock-cut tombs under sandstone pyramids. This tradition lasted for about a thousand years and now more than 400 pyramids remain scattered throughout different parts of Sudan; in places for example such as el-Kurru, Nuri, Jebel Barkal, and Meroe. During the Kushite period, tomb superstructures associated with the burials of the common people and nobility were diverse ranging from mud brick pyramids to mounds of large stones or small pebbles; however, in several Meroitic cemeteries, such as at Dangeil, no traces of tomb superstructures have been found.



Left: Post-Meroitic bed leg from Gabati, late 5th century AD (SNM 27868) (photograph Rocco Ricci © The British Museum)
Right: Modern bed leg, Dangeil



Modern wooden bed, Dangeil



Decorated faience bottle insitu



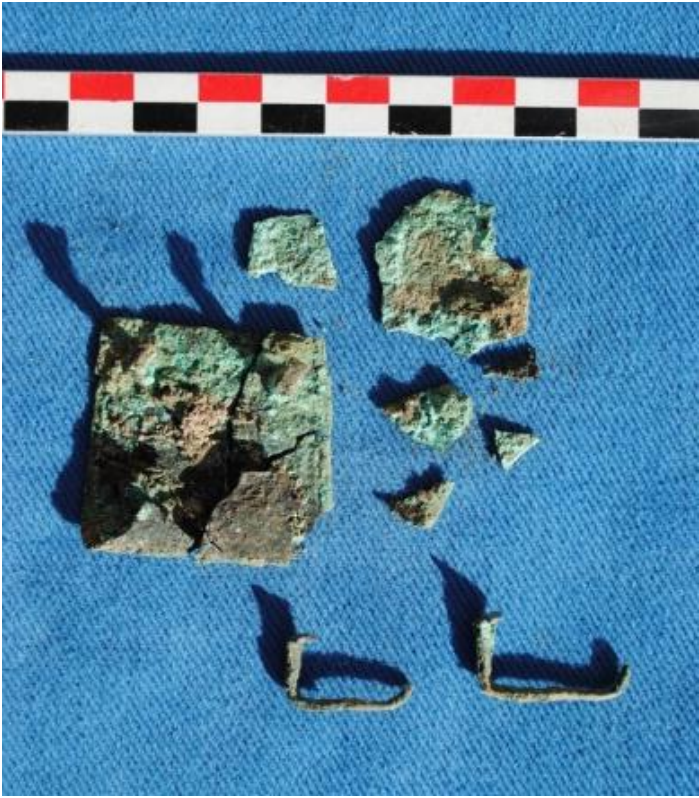
Glass bottle



Faience box with udjat eyes

Discoveries in ancient tombs can provide a clear indication about the nature of work and activities practiced by the deceased during his life. One example of such a burial includes an archer found in the Dangeil cemetery. Archers served as hunters and warriors using the bow and arrow as their primary weapon. The archer at Dangeil was identified by the presence of a stone thumb ring or archers’ loose, found *insitu* on his thumb and by iron arrowheads situated in front of his body. Thumb rings are well-known objects associated with archery, being used to draw back the bowstring. Representations of Meroitic kings and queens wearing thumb rings are numerous among the inscriptions on the walls of temples and in the funerary chapels of the pyramids as well as in Meroitic art.

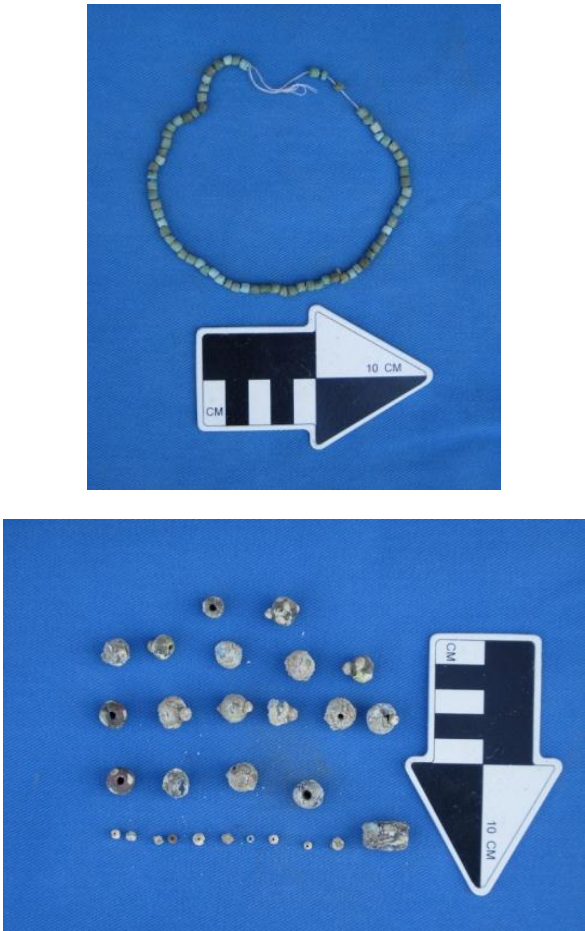
Copper fastenings



Silver signet finger ring after conservation (photographs © The British Museum)



Beads and items of personal adornment are also common. The most popular are cylindrical beads made of faience and rounded glass beads. They are often found around the hands or neck of the deceased and sometimes around the pelvic area. The wearing of beads for personal decoration is a long-standing tradition in Sudan that is still practiced among some tribes in different parts of the country.



Beads of faience and glass

Bottles, scarabs and amulets made of faience, ostrich eggshell, as well as of glass, are among the finds recovered so far. These objects are imported and indicative of large scale trade between the people in Dangeil, central Africa and the Mediterranean world.

Students training in site documentation



engaging. Moreover people were buried according to specific cultural traditions with objects that speak of their lives, communities and families.

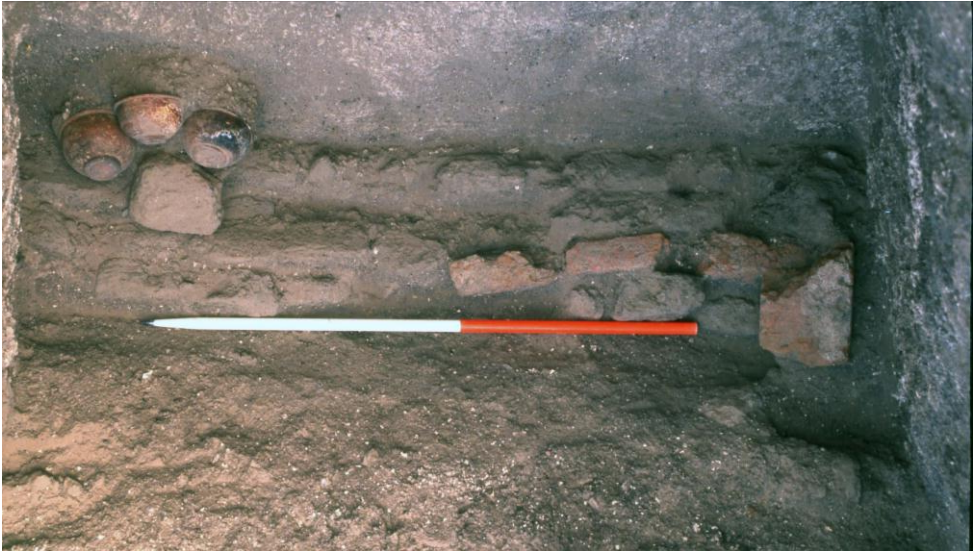
The excavation of the cemetery site at Dangeil is providing an opportunity for students of archaeology from Sudanese universities as well as for foreign students to receive training in archaeological fieldwork. To date, 22 Sudanese, one Canadian and five French students have been trained in excavation techniques, site documentation and object registration during previous field seasons.



Sudanese and foreign students excavating in Dangeil’s cemetery WTC

Metal objects consisting of copper-alloy bowls, rings, fastenings and nails as well as iron arrowheads are often found in the tombs. These kinds of objects are usually found in poor condition due to environmental conditions and therefore are sent for conservation and cleaning by specialists. For example a signet ring made of silver was found together with another of copper. Both have been well-cleaned and conserved. Copper-alloy bowls of various forms have been well documented in the excavated tombs and some have been cleaned and restored.

Pottery bowls containing incense



Generally, pottery is the most important find because it can provide information about the dating of the tomb and through the study of its contents and form we can perhaps understand its function. In one tomb, the analysis of soil samples from inside three bowls, found placed upside down in front of the blocking wall, revealed the use of incense and contained traces of perfumes and essential oils made from a mixture of aromatic plants.



Copper-alloy bowls before conservation



Copper-alloy bowl after conservation



Copper-alloy bowl after conservation with a graffito, newly revealed (photographs © The British Museum)

The semi-triangular shaped tomb cuts



All of the excavated tombs in Dangeil's Meroitic cemetery have an east-west sloping descender leading to a north-south, oval shaped burial chamber at the western end. At the descender, a blocking wall of mud or red bricks closed the burial. The tombs vary in size from small burials with a short descender to those with a long sloping descender of up to 4 metres in length. From the tombs excavated, it is clear that their preservation varies from well preserved, to poorly preserved and greatly disturbed tombs, often the result of tomb plundering in ancient times. Therefore, when excavating, the initial appearance and state of the blocking wall of the burial chamber was often used as a measure to estimate and anticipate the degree of damage caused by looters. Tomb robbery was well known in ancient times and an activity not only associated with the elite and royal burials but also with the tombs of common people.

Tomb Structure

The Meroitic Cemetery at Dangeil

The size of the cemetery has not yet been determined, however, we believe that the ancient tombs are scattered over a vast area along the road to el-Fereikha and over the area to the south of the modern cemetery. The technique we used to identify the tomb shafts involved the initial removal of about 10cm of the ground surface. Beneath this layer, outlines of a whitish coloured fill normally marked the shafts of the tombs. The shafts are triangular in shape, oriented east-west with a rounded edge in the eastern side. Trenches along the drainage channel beside the Strahat Wad el-Toum (Rest House) and along the southern edge of the modern cemetery have been cleaned in order to identify ancient tombs. As a result a total of 52 tombs have been identified and excavated thus far during this ongoing excavation and rescue project.



Surface clearance to identify tomb shaft



Partially intact red brick blocking wall



Excavated tombs at Dangeil, WTC

Orientation and Position of the Deceased

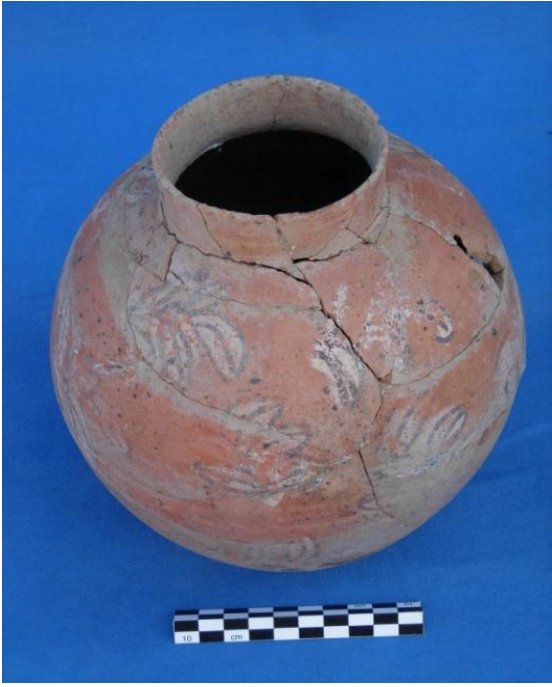
A semi-flexed position is common in most of the excavated tombs with the body oriented north-south, laid on the left side, with the head to the south

of tombs with the body laid on its back, oriented north-south, with the head facing west. Examples of an extended position have been noted in a number to the south.

Multiple burials and evidence for the reuse of the tombs are also features observed in the excavated tombs. The study of the human remains reveals that most of the tombs contained more than one individual and that the use of a tomb for more than one deceased individual was associated with the contracted and the semi-flexed positions.



Skeleton in a flexed position



Examples of stamped and painted pottery



Unique form of pottery bowl

Fine ware bowls were also well documented in the excavated tombs. This type of bowl is thin-walled, smooth, light in colour and painted possibly with stamped decoration along the rim. Common examples are decorated with cobra figures around the rim and some are painted with floral patterns.