

# THE HERITAGE OF THE A-GROUP. A CHRONOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL REINVESTIGATION

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*Abstract: The focus of the recent investigation lies on the cultural assignment and archaeological chronology of the A-Group, the scientific result of which is to establish an internal chronology. With the emphasis on the Nubian pottery classes and type groups the study is mainly based on the find materials of the early surveys in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but also on the lately published works of the Aswan – Kom Ombo – Survey. The bulk of the published find material represents the material culture that was excavated during the different salvage campaigns conducted in Lower Nubia and in the Second Cataract area.*

*Keywords: A-Group; Lower Nubia; 4<sup>th</sup> millennium; cultural assignment; chronology; pottery.*

The A-Group of Lower Nubia represents the indigenous population south of the Naqada Culture in the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC (Fig. 1). The *terminus technicus* A-Group was introduced by G. A. Reisner.<sup>2</sup> The archaeological culture is defined by cemeteries and poorly preserved habitation sites and camp-sites from Kubania to the Wadi Halfa reach and the Second Cataract region.<sup>3</sup>

The modern scientific approach to the A-Group is methodologically achieved by 1.) the cultural assignment of the anew defined find material of the archaeological sites – thankfully using the existing reconstruction of the A-Group with its chronological periods by H.A. Nordström as a model of cultural anthropology that presents a modern classification of the object groups –, and by 2.) showing the internal chronology of this cultural group.<sup>4</sup> The Nubian culture affords the scrutinising reanalysis of the object groups already published<sup>5</sup> and of its system of classification of the adapted artefacts by way of a descriptive typology,

concerning the ecological, archaeological, and chronological aspect. The artefacts found on the sites (pottery, lithics, utility objects made of stone and ivory/bone, ...) permit a scientific investigation of the cultural remains on a wider extent, in order to identify the Nubian cultural elements in the contexts, the social development, the relationships with Egypt as well as the relative chronology of the A-Group. The chronological scheme of the A-Group is based on Nordström's division in Early A-Group, Middle A-Group and Terminal A-Group, which he revised later.<sup>6</sup> In the new chronological scheme the Early A-Group corresponds to Naqada Ic – IIc, the Middle A-Group to Naqada IId – IIIa, the Terminal A-Group to Naqada IIId – early/mid-1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty. But also other chronologies published are known, which differ in the synchronisation of the three periods of the A-Group with the chronological stages of the Naqada Culture.<sup>7</sup> With the relative chronological settings of the conventionally used periods of the A-Group in mind, the material culture needs to be reinvestigated, the various Nubian elements defined, and the strong presence of Egyptian finds in Lower Nubia taken under more consideration also in respect of the socio-cultural dynamics of the archaeological group. With the help of the contextual significant sites and diagnostic find material already published, there is evidence for a more detailed chronology of the A-Group that is based on distinctive stages and sub-stages within the three consecutive periods which will eventually show the cultural development and changes of the socio-economic and socio-cultural structure of the Nubian culture as well as the historical implications of the few pieces of artistic and glyptic evidence in the Protodynastic and Early Dynastic era.

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<sup>2</sup> REISNER 1910, esp. 5–6.

<sup>3</sup> JUNKER 1919, 4; NORDSTRÖM 1972, 17, 22, pls. 2–5; 2004, 134–135, fig. 1, 140–141, figs. 5–7.

<sup>4</sup> The issues of this article are a comprehensive presentation of the PhD by the author (University of Vienna, Institute of Egyptology).

<sup>5</sup> REISNER 1910; FIRTH 1912; 1915; 1927; JUNKER 1919; GRIFFITH 1921; STEINDORFF 1935; EMERY and KIRWAN 1935; NORDSTRÖM 1972; WILLIAMS 1986; 1989; GATTO *et al.* 2009.

<sup>6</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972, 28–31, fig. 1, 250–251, tab. 38 (<sup>14</sup>C-method); 2004, 140–142.

<sup>7</sup> TRIGGER 1965, 66, 68–79; WILLIAMS 1986, 13, tab. 3, 19, tab. 1; GATTO 2006, 67; KAISER 1957.

**1. Methods.**

The cultural assignment of the A-Group has since posed a problematic issue in the excavation publications of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century insofar that there

was no clear line concerning the ethnic issue, and since then it is consequently posing a problematic perspective on the definition of the archaeological group as a cultural entity in Lower Nubia. The scientific research still aims at the reconstruction of

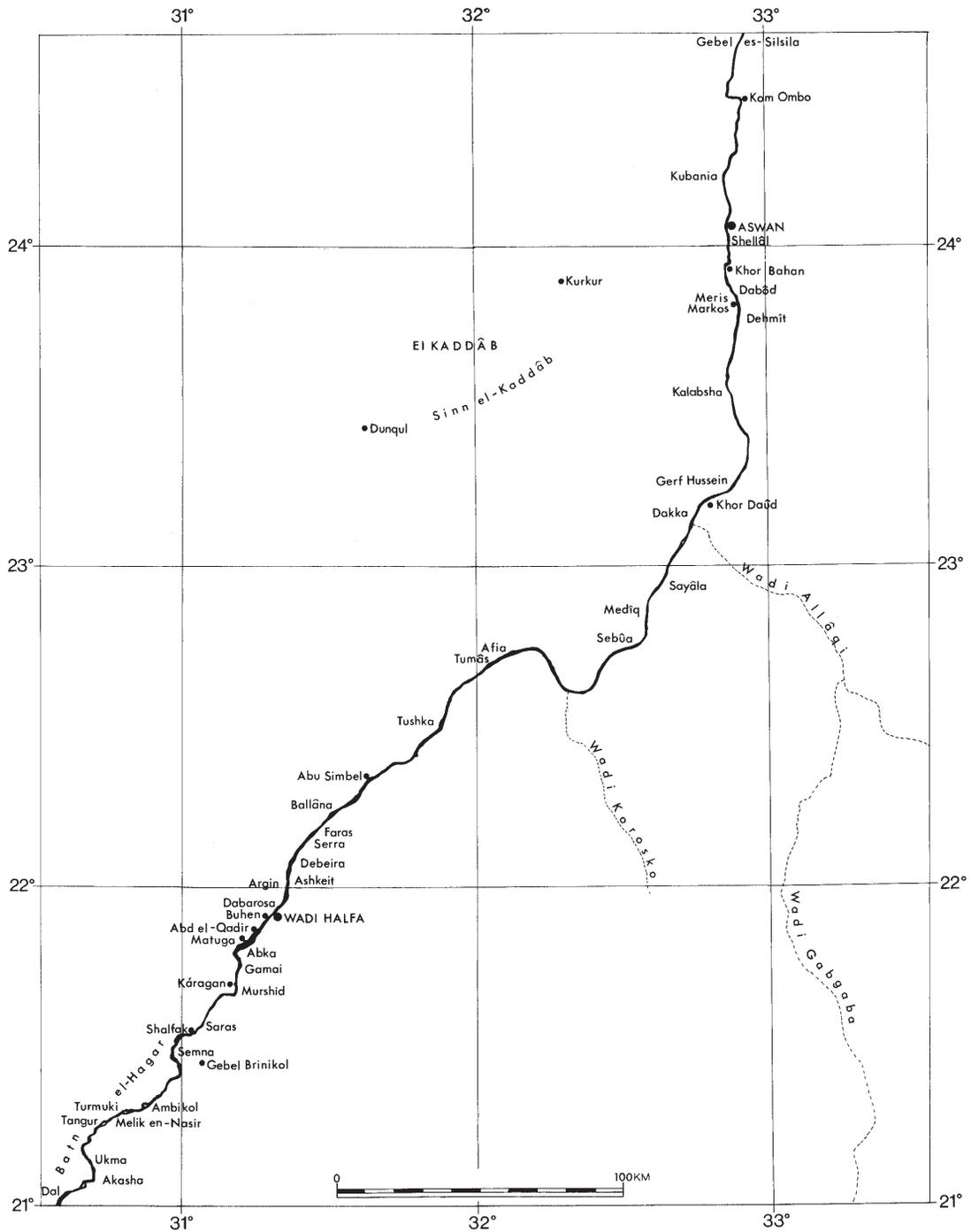


Fig. 1 Map of Lower Nubia with A-Group sites (after NORDSTRÖM 1972, pl. 2).

the A-Group as a late Neolithic<sup>8</sup> culture of the Early Nubian Sequence with the use of copper implements<sup>9</sup> that were imported from the Chalcolithic culture of the Naqada people, which, therefore, needs to be reconsidered in respect of the Predynastic “proto-historic” and the Early Dynastic history of ancient Egypt.<sup>10</sup> The discernible Nubian elements in the assemblages of the cemeteries and the few habitation sites in the Nile valley are necessary to define the attributes of the archaeological culture; its cultural traits (Nubian Neolithic) reveal the homogenous structure of the A-Group. Any new modern reconstruction of the A-Group is based on the earlier approaches thereon.<sup>11</sup>

The relative chronology of the varied and diverse material culture of the A-Group is methodologically based on the undisturbed funeral contexts and few habitation sites as well as the presence/absence of diagnostic Nubian items and Egyptian imports with a clear sequence. The abundance of the cemetery data affords a quantitative analysis with several parameters such as burial customs, grave types and grave-goods (many – few, utility objects/utility pottery wares – prestige items/luxury pottery, local – imported goods/pottery) that hint at the sites’ chronological significance. These given facts of the archaeological evidence also are adequately applied on the settlement remains. The imported Egyptian trade goods secure the basis for the dating of the archaeological contexts. The relative chronology already established is a useful method wherever undisturbed assemblages are present, and thanks to cross-referencing from plundered and poorly dated or undated graves which form the main group of sites the amount of the graves and the artefact groups, the stock-flow, especially the pottery and the combination of the pottery types allow the interpretation of the contexts on a local, regional and inter-regional basis. This study of the A-Group is meant as a comprising compilation of the funeral and settlement material. The aspect of

continuity in the material culture of the A-Group is an eminent one besides the chronological one within a study concerning the A-Group as a cultural entity. By means of ceramical series of the Nubian pottery type groups and the types within the pottery classes, the chronological attribution is possible. The combination of Naqada imports and the type combinations of Naqada vessels and/or Nubian vessels in most of the archaeological contexts is of high chronological significance. The repertoire of ceramics includes many types of the B-class in the older graves and prestige vessels such as well-known forms of the D- and W-class which proofs the existence of a far-reaching trading network from the beginning of the Early A-Group onwards.<sup>12</sup> The amount and the classification of the local types of the *Black-mouthed*/BM ware as the regional distribution of the different types of the Naqada pottery and the older and younger Nubian type groups and vessel forms are cultural markers (BM ware, incised ware) and some of the Nubian wares are *index fossils* of high scientific value (Rippled ware, Painted Eggshell ware).<sup>13</sup> Petrie’s Sequence Dates (showing some types of the BM ware in his B-class and a few decorated vessels of Nubian origin in his P-class)<sup>14</sup>, Kaiser’s Stufensystem, and Hendrickx’ (and others) database of Naqada wares are most helpful when it comes to synchronise the Naqada pottery types in Nubia.<sup>15</sup> The scientific interest in this study mainly concerns the internal chronology of the A-Group. The pottery series of the *Black-mouthed* ware (BM), the Rippled ware and the *Sudanese Incised* ware reveal morphological changes and modifications of shapes (bases, rims) and innovative features (surface properties, modes of decoration), as well as different or new fabrics. Already in the Early A-Group there is a notable variety of BM vessel types.<sup>16</sup> The available data hopefully make the chronological layout clear, namely some distinctive stages of the established chronological periods of the A-Group. The pottery

<sup>8</sup> The cultural link with the Abkan (5<sup>th</sup> – early half of the 4<sup>th</sup> mill. BC) has to be considered as an important one, NORDSTRÖM 1972, 17; 2004, 141; 2006, 37; LANGE and NORDSTRÖM 2006; GATTO 2006, 66–67.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. FIRTH 1927, pl. 22.b.

<sup>10</sup> REISNER 1910, 300–332; JUNKER 1919, 2–5; NORDSTRÖM 1972, 12–17, 17–32; GATTO *et al.* 2009; GATTO 2011; 2014.

<sup>11</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972; WILLIAMS 1986; 1989; SMITH 1991; and see above n. 3 for the cultural theories of the early excavators.

<sup>12</sup> REISNER 1910, 314–332; GATTO and TIRATERRA 1996, 331–334; ROY 2011.

<sup>13</sup> For the pottery classification c.f. REISNER 1910, 316–330; NORDSTRÖM 1972, 81–94, pls. 22–23, 36–48.

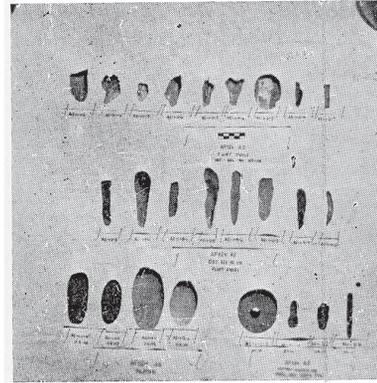
<sup>14</sup> PETRIE 1921, pls. I, II, V, VI, VII, VIII, IX, X.

<sup>15</sup> PETRIE 1901a, frontispiece; 1921; 1953; KAISER 1957, 69–77, Taf. 15–26; HENDRICKX 1996; 1999; 2011; BUCHEZ 2011a.

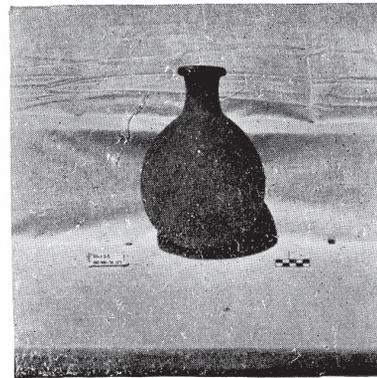
<sup>16</sup> FIRTH 1912, pl. 44.a.; 1915, pl. 27.d.; GATTO 1998, 107–109, fig. 2.



1.—Afyeh, Settlement A.5. General view of excavated house from south.



2.—Afyeh, Settlement A.5. Miscellaneous objects from excavated house, A-Group.



3.—Afyeh, Settlement A.5. Buff ware jar, A-Group.

Fig. 2 Stone structure at Afia, settlement A.5 and some findings (after SMITH 1962, pl. VII).

classification in this investigation follows that of Nordström, which includes the different fabrics (ID, IE, IIA, IIB/IIIE, III), wares (H1 – H4), shapes and type groups of the Nubian vessels.<sup>17</sup> Its systematic order (as elements of a finite group) is essential in respect of the typology of the pottery classes and ceramical series.

## 2. Research questions.

The interpretation of the archaeological evidence, the findings of the cemeteries and settlements along the Nile valley relies on the definition of the A-Group's archaeological contexts as a cultural

entity in its regional and chronological distribution south of Gebel es-Silsila (Fig. 1). The richly furnished burials and varied findings of the settlement remains, grave types, funeral equipment, burial customs and skeleton material clearly show homogenous cultural traits like subsistence and socio-economic structure already in the oldest graves of the Early A-Group.<sup>18</sup> The indigenous development of the A-Group but also its cultural links (within the pottery and lithic assemblage) with the non-agricultural Abkan, a cultural entity located at the Second Cataract,<sup>19</sup> and the relationships with contemporary cultures testify its uniformity and helps to confirm the A-Group accord-

<sup>17</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972, 33–94, pls. 6–48.

<sup>18</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972, 28; contradictory to GATTO and TIRATERA 1996, 334; GATTO 1998, 109. For the very early graves and cemeteries with a clear chronological setting see REISNER 1910, 114–141; FIRTH 1915, 97–104.

<sup>19</sup> MYERS 1958; 1960; SHINER 1968; NORDSTRÖM 1972, 12–17; 2006, 36–38.

ingly to the material culture. The material culture includes a characteristic repertoire of items and Egyptian imports that change in the stages of the Early A-Group as well as there are innovations in the Middle A-Group and certain cultural traits that unmistakably mark the Terminal A-Group.

Despite the many funerary contexts of the large necropoleis and smaller cemeteries which are

located in the Nile valley, there are regrettably few settlement remains and it seems that the habitation sites in the Nile valley and abris are only temporarily used; the most important is the „archaic camp“ Meris Markos ASN 40:300 with Nubian artefacts and trade-goods dating to Naqada II–III. Permanent buildings are known from Afia (Fig. 2) south of the Korosko bend of the Nile with a



Fig. 3 Bone and ivory objects from northern Lower Nubia (after REISNER 1910, pl. 66.a.b.).

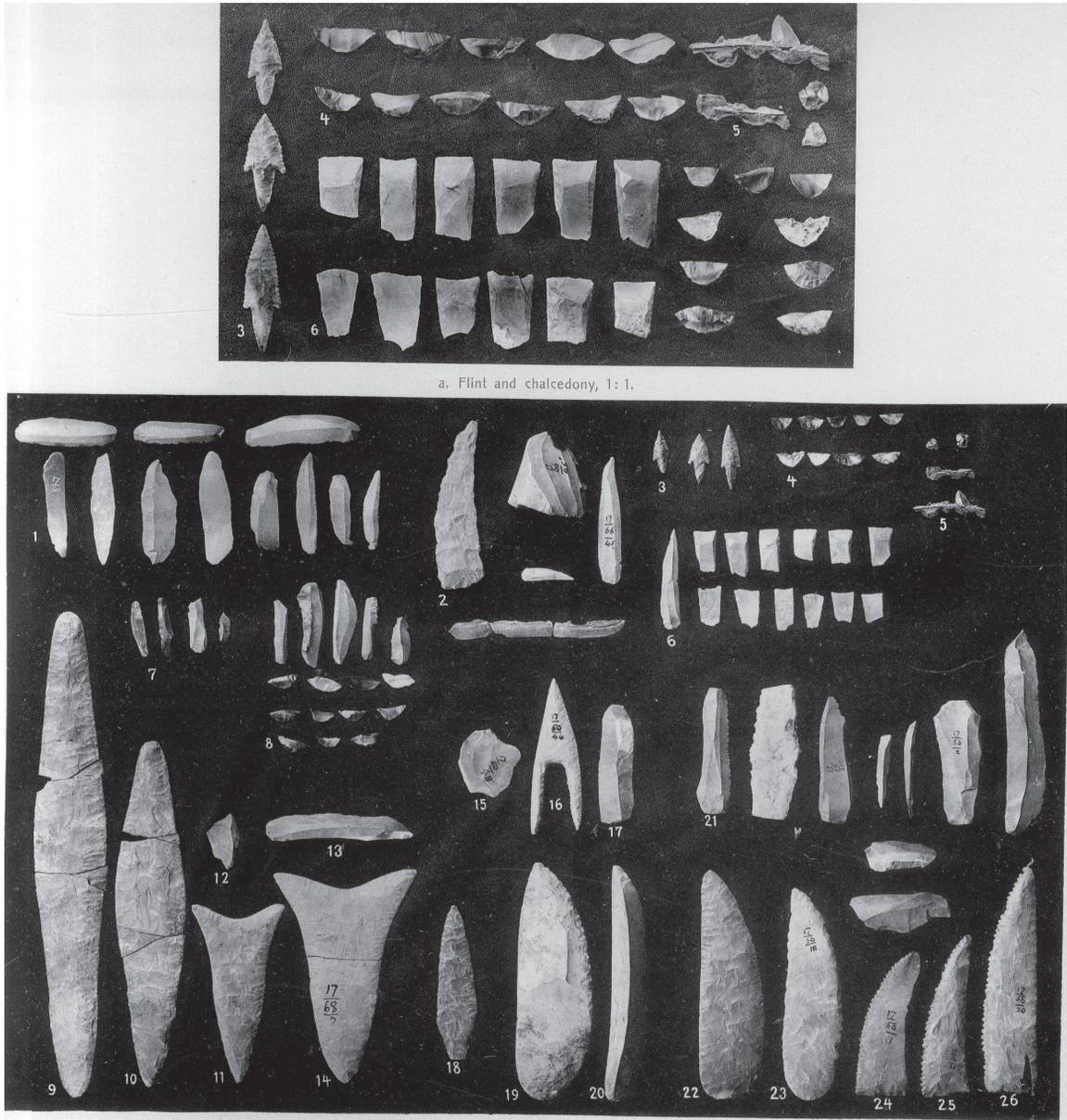


Fig. 4 Lithics from Khor Bahan ASN 17 (after REISNER 1910, pl. 62.a.b.).

chronological setting in the Middle (IIIa) and Terminal A-Group (IIIb-c/early 1st Dyn.). The scarce and still insufficiently published habitation sites and settlement remains (e.g. Dakka, Faras) show the spatial distribution of the sites in the A-Group territory.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the sometimes difficult methodological access of the findings due to the limited documentation of the contexts, the material culture is the

prime criterion for the cultural assignment and classification of the object groups. The A-Group of Lower Nubia is defined through a wide spectrum of Nubian components:

- Utility objects: works of bone and ivory (needles, awls, combs) (Fig. 3).
- Lithics and stone tools: lunates, arrow-heads, hammer-stones, stone axes/celts, mortars, grinders (Fig. 4).

<sup>20</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972, 20–21, 22–23; BIETAK and ENGELMAYER 1963, REISNER 1910, 215–218; SMITH 1962, 58–61, pl. VII; LAL 1967; STEVENSON 2012, 13–19; GATTO 2006, 66, tab.1.

For Dakka and Faras see FIRTH 1915, 7, 9–10; GRIFFITH 1921, 4–5.

- Personal adornment: pearls, amulets and pendants made of semi-precious stones, faience, ivory and shell (Fig. 5).
- Status/prestige items: e.g. ostrich feather fans, quartz palettes, incense burners (Fig. 6, Fig. 7).
- Paraphernalia: zoomorphic and human figurines, decorated ostrich eggs.
- Pottery: hand-made bowls and jars made of Nile clay showing a specific morphology and different fabrics in Lower Nubia and Shale tempered fabrics (esp. in the Kubania region).<sup>21</sup> Among the pottery type groups of Nordström's classification there are some distinctive wares like the *Black-mouthed* pottery (polished and high-polished/unpolished), type groups AVII, AIX,<sup>22</sup> the Rippled ware (RP: red-coated, polished, BP: black-polished ware, BM: red-coated, black-mouthed, polished), type groups AIV, AVI, AX, and the Painted Eggshell ware, type group AVIII (BM, polished) (Fig. 8a-d).

The re-investigation of the A-Group in Lower Nubia is dealing with a cultural unit of the northern Nile valley that regionally expands down to the Wadi Halfa reach and the Second Cataract region and as such has to be regarded as a northernmost exponent of the Sudanese ceramic tradition of the *Khartoum Technocomplex*. The *Sudanese Incised* ware (type groups AI, AIII, AV, AVII, AIX) (Fig. 8d) with its predominate presence in the southern region of the A-Group's territory shows different decoration modes<sup>23</sup> and is clearly derivative from the Abkan Nubian Neolithic tradition which displays close affinities with the pottery production of the central Sudan and northern Chad.<sup>24</sup> The reconstruction of the cultural development and the socio-economic evolution of the A-Group derives its importance in the "historic processes" of the late Prehistoric (Naqada IIc-d) period and in connection with the sociocultural and political development of the late Naqada Culture (Naqada IIIb-d) in Egypt and further in the early Old Kingdom.



Fig. 5 Personal adornments made of semi-precious stones (after NORDSTRÖM 1972, pl. 194).

### 2a. *The internal chronology.*

The relative chronology of the A-Group is founded on the diagnostic grave-goods and undisturbed contexts of the site assemblages.<sup>25</sup> The small amount of graves of a period in the chronological sequence has to be acknowledged as a cultural marker of the Nubian A-Group. The contexts show a recognisable spatial distribution in Lower Nubia that enables a closer look on the chronological periods Early, Middle and Terminal<sup>26</sup>/Late A-Group. The funeral contexts and settlement remains represent undisputable facts. The artefacts that are to be systematically arranged within the artefact groups and object types and also within

<sup>21</sup> The Nubian pottery from the cemetery and settlement at Nag el-Qarmila can be divided in locally produced Shale ware and vessels with a fabric that corresponds to the Fabric IIA (sand and ash-tempered), cf. GATTO *et al.* 2009, 195–197, fig. 16; NORDSTRÖM 1972, 51.

<sup>22</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972, 35–52, 58–66, 68–79, 81–90, pls. 6–26, 36–45; GATTO *et al.* 2009, 196–198, fig. 16.8–9 (Nile A), 14–17 (Shale), 23–27 (Fabric IIA).

<sup>23</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972, 74–77, pls. 24–26; WILLIAMS 1986, 60–61, 62–65, tab. 11, 17, 18, figs. 21, 33, 34, pls. 11, 14–16; 1989, 24, 31, pls. 34, 35.

<sup>24</sup> ARKELL 1949; 1953; NORDSTRÖM 1972, 12–17, 49–50, 58–60, 80; 2004, 141; 2006, 36–38; GATTO 2006, 66–67.

<sup>25</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972, 28–31; 2004, 140–142; WILLIAMS 1986, 13; GATTO 2006, 67.

<sup>26</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972, 28–29; WILLIAMS 1986, 13, tab. 3.

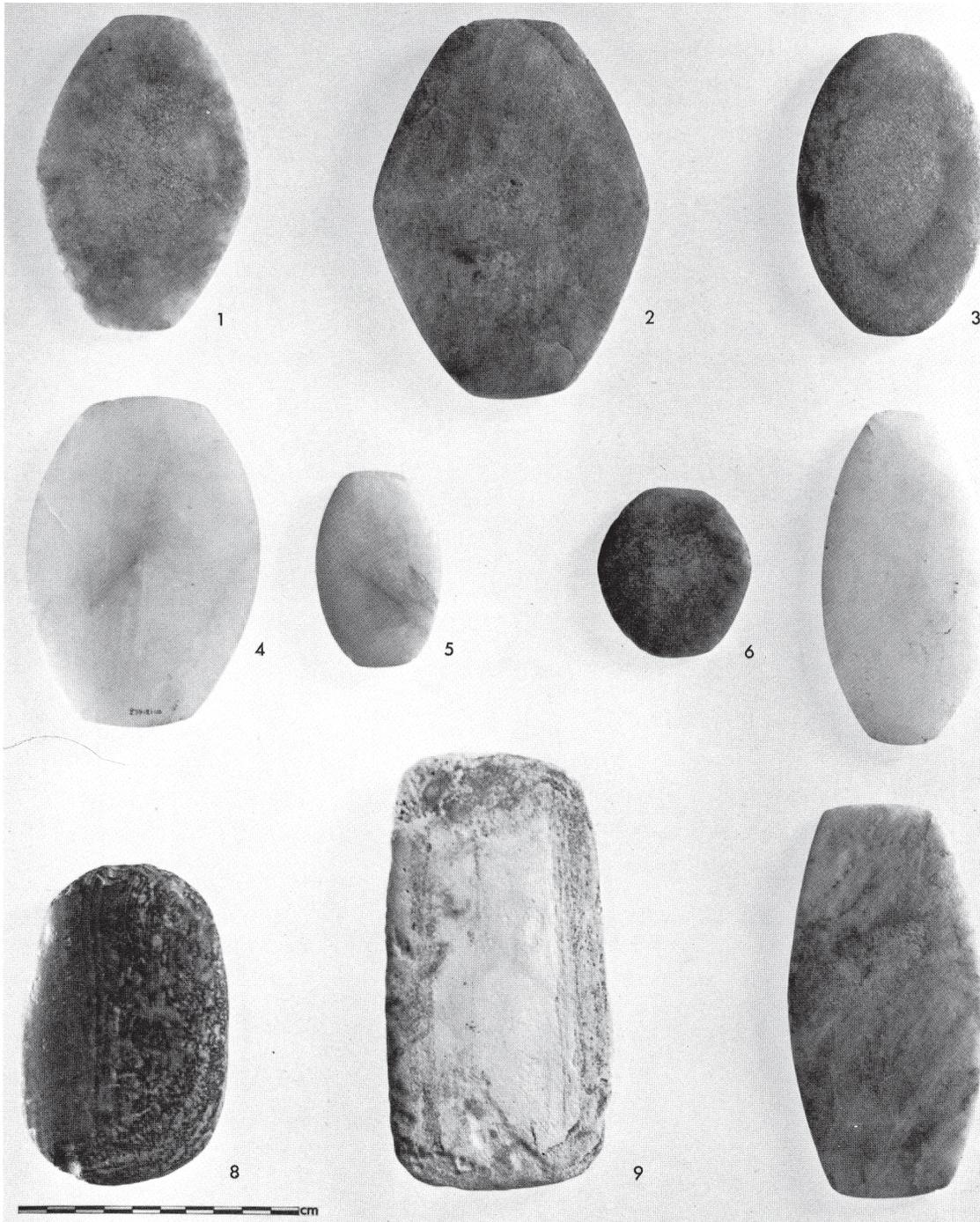


Fig. 6 Quartz palettes from the concession area of the SJE (after NORDSTRÖM 1972, pl. 191).

the synchronised stages of the Naqada Culture<sup>27</sup> build up the sound platform for the internal chronology. The analytically examined grave contents (here the author concentrates on the pottery mate-

rial) - and also on a minor scale the settlement material - can be classified in their respective object group as cultural elements, *index fossils*, and imports. Furthermore, the contingent of Nubi-

<sup>27</sup> KAISER 1957, 69–77, Tab. 15–26; HENDRICKX 1996, 1999, 2011; BUCHEZ 2011b.



Fig. 7 Qustul Incense Burner from tomb L 24 (after WILLIAMS 1986, pl. 38).

an pottery in sites of southern Upper Egypt, e. g. in Hierakonpolis, is of chronological value.<sup>28</sup> With the help of the diagnostic Naqada imports and identifiable Nubian vessels and their ceramical sequences, the chronological hierarchy can be fixed and so far published radiocarbon determinations<sup>29</sup> secure the A-Group's chronological position. The constant and in many sites high percent-

age of Egyptian ceramic vessels is astounding, but the repertoire of grave-goods in the course of the Early A-Group as well as the Middle A-Group is defined by characteristic vessel categories (BM ware, Rippled ware, *Sudanese Incised* ware). The contexts show recurrent combinations of Nubian items and pottery with Egyptian imports (non-ceramical, ceramical) or pottery only (Fig. 9), or a

<sup>28</sup> Discussing the imports in Lower Nubia c.f. GATTO and TIRATERRA 1996; GATTO 1998, 107; 2003, 14–15; GATTO *et al.* 2009, 195–201.

<sup>29</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972, 29–31, 250–251; GATTO 2006, 66–67, tab. 1.

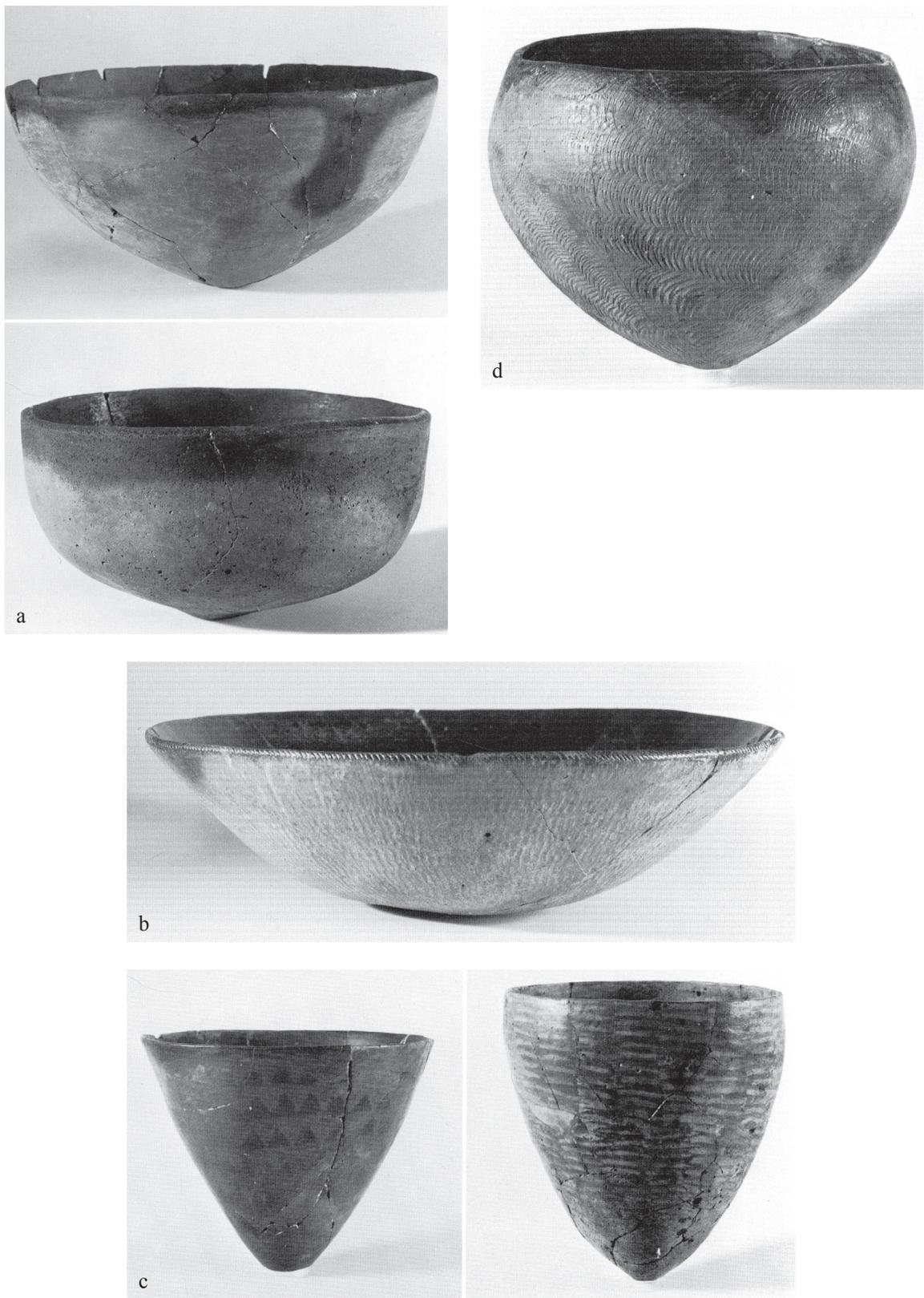


Fig. 8 a. BM pottery from SJE 277:49, 277:56, b. Rippled ware from SJE 332:44, c. Painted Eggshell ware from SJE 277:49, 332:53B, d. *Sudanese Incised* ware from SJE 277:30 (after NORDSTRÖM 1972, pls. 165.1–2, 169.1, 175.3–4, 170.2).

fully Nubian grave furniture. The southernmost assemblage with a mixed repertoire of Nubian and Naqada items is known from Saras-West.<sup>30</sup> The increasing quantity of vessels of the Nubian pottery wares allow the establishment of a morphological and chronological sequence. The presence of cultural markers like diagnostic vessel shapes of the pointed and nearly pointed BM<sup>31</sup> jars (e.g. from ASN 17, ASN 76, 79, ASN 99, 102, 103)<sup>32</sup> marks the significance of the contexts of the Early A-Group with its distinctive stages that include specific features in the material culture. The elder stage of the Early A-Group (Ältere Frühe A-Gruppe) corresponds to Naqada Ic – IIa, the later stage of the Early A-Group (Jüngere Frühe A-Gruppe) to Naqada IIb(-c). In both stages several types of the B-class and BM pottery of the A-Group (in a limited number) are found together in graves at Khor Bahan, Shellal cemetery 7:200, and Dakka cemeteries 99, 102, 103, often in combination with shist palettes of various types (rhomboid, boat-shaped, zoomorphic) and mace-heads. The graves of Naqada IIb contain R-vessels (ASN 17:66).<sup>33</sup> No maces were found. In Dakka the amount of the Nubian pottery is higher, there are morphological types of the BM ware which are clear precursors of the types known in the Middle A-Group.<sup>34</sup> There are few examples of the RP ware, the few decorated vessels show types of the N-Ware (ASN 17:50, 17:89, ASN 99:68, ASN 103:6.14.32.37)<sup>35</sup> and seldom C-vessels (Kubania, ASN 17:6, 17:61).<sup>36</sup> According to the material culture, it seems justified to establish a transitional stage before the Middle A-Group that corresponds with its contexts and grave contents to Naqada IIc-d. Since there are many graves in northern Lower Nubia with a new combination of grave-goods that cannot be classified as Early or Middle A-Group (R 81 types, R 84d, R 85, P 40k, e, D 63a, D 67c,

W 24-27, W 43b),<sup>37</sup> it can be assumed that these belong to a transitional period that allows the alteration of the chronological scheme as follows: Early A-Group Ic – IIb/c, Transitional Stage IIc-d (Hendrickx: Naq IIC-D1-2), Middle A-Group IIIa<sub>1-2</sub>. The rich graves that belong to this stage include diagnostic items in their sometimes rich funerary equipment like double bird slate palettes and early pottery forms of the P-, D-, W-, L-class and Nubian pottery (e.g. ASN 17:15, 17:64/40, ASN 136:3).<sup>38</sup> The pit-and-side-chamber graves represent an innovative shaft type that appears to be a development of the round grave with the little round annexes in the Dakka cemeteries (ASN 103:6, 12).<sup>39</sup> The Transitional Stage is best represented in the fertile region of Gerf Hussein and Dakka, the number of grave-goods are few (middle to low frequency of items) but they include recurrent diagnostic types. The graves in northern Lower Nubia that belong to this pre-formation stage of the A-Group are traditionally linked to the northern sites of Lower Nubia including Kubania north of the First Cataract, but they show new elements as mentioned above (cemeteries ASN 17, ASN 76, 78, 79, ASN 99, 101/102, 103, ASN 134, 136). The level of formation of the Middle A-Group (e.g. in regard of the orientation of the dead) is not yet achieved; the thus analysed contexts and findings will permit the fixing of the individual chronological span of the Early (Ic – IIb(-c)), Middle (IIIa<sub>1-2</sub>) and Terminal A-Group (IIIb – early to mid-1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty; Hendrickx: IIIB-C1-2). The Middle A-Group appears with its archaeological evidence as the formative stage but within the Terminal/Late A-Group there are more elements that may belong to two stages of the late period. The find combinations allow to date some graves to the early 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty only. They include the Painted Eggshell ware, *Heavy Incised* ware,<sup>40</sup>

<sup>30</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972, 22–23 (and bibliography); 2004, 140–141.

<sup>31</sup> REISNER 1910, 317–318, 320–322, 325, figs. 278.1.2.38.68. 69.70, 281.1–3.8, 285.1–6 (Early A-Group and Transitional Stage), 13–14, 286.1–5.7–15, 292.1–16.19–26 (Middle – Terminal A-Group); FIRTH 1912, pl. 44.a. 1.– 6. (Early A-Group – Middle A-Group); 1915, pl. 27.d. (Early A-Group – Transitional Stage); JUNKER 1919, 62–63, Abb. 22 (Early A-Group – Middle A-Group).

<sup>32</sup> REISNER 1910; FIRTH 1912; 1915.

<sup>33</sup> REISNER 1910; FIRTH 1915.

<sup>34</sup> FIRTH 1915, pl. 27.d; also FIRTH 1912, pl. 44.a.

<sup>35</sup> REISNER 1910, 118–120, 127, 319, fig. 280; FIRTH 1915, 49, fig. 20, 97–104, pl. 27.c. For the chronology of the N-Ware, c.f. GLÜCK 2007, 9–41.

<sup>36</sup> JUNKER 1919, 48–49, Abb. 8–9; REISNER 1910, 319, fig. 280.4.

<sup>37</sup> The detailed results are presented in my PhD (University of Vienna, Institute of Egyptology).

<sup>38</sup> REISNER 1910, 128–130, figs. 81, 82, 84, pls. 27c, 28b; FIRTH 1927, 201.

<sup>39</sup> FIRTH 1915, 97, 98.

<sup>40</sup> This ware is found in post-A-Group contexts in northern Lower Nubia (ASN 77), the ware is of chronological significance due to its morphological affinity to the early forms and decoration patterns of the C-Group, c.f. GLÜCK 2005, 131–138.

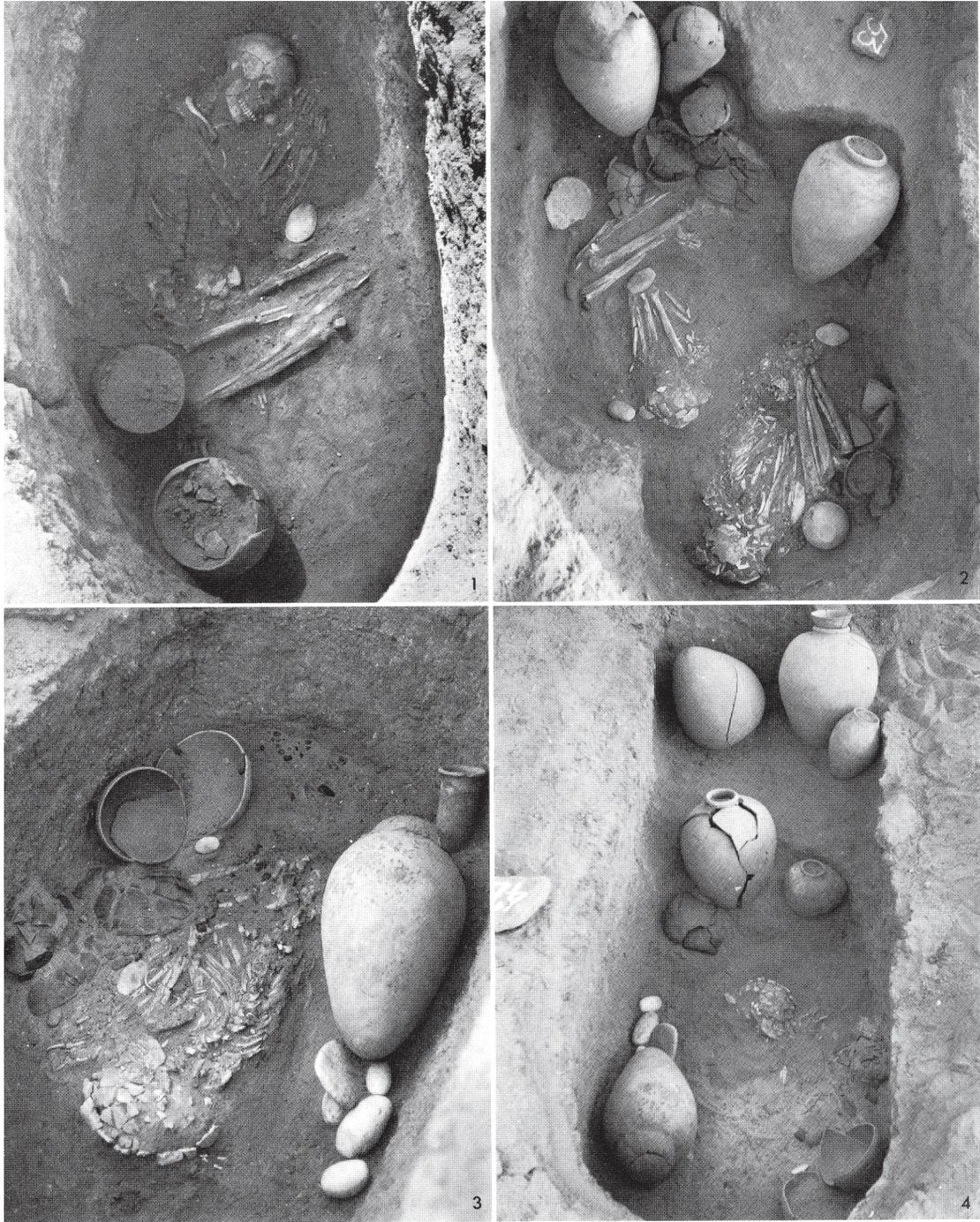


Fig. 9 Burials SJE 322:43, 53A-B, 42 (after NORDSTRÖM 1972, pl. 146).

*Sudanese Incised* ware, BM ware, BM Rippled ware and imports like L-bowls, small L-jars and storage jars of the L-class (SJE 298:9, 15, SJE 332:42). The initial stage of the Terminal A-Group is represented by examples of the Painted Eggshell

ware, *Sudanese Incised* ware, BM ware, BM Rippled ware, RP pottery, and imports like necked jars of the type series L 53, cylindrical vases with and without net-pattern, and the type series L 30, L 36.<sup>41</sup> The typologically different repertoire of the

<sup>41</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972, pls. 36–45, 46–48, 68–69, 88–89.

Naqada pottery as well as those of the Nubian type groups and their combinations clearly confirm the chronological stages and attest the regional distribution, e.g. the marked predominance of sites of the Early A-Group in northern Lower Nubia, whereas the younger stages of these sites and additional places down to the royal cemeteries of Qustul in the Terminal A-Group are situated in the southern part of Lower Nubia. Vice versa there is a shift in the spatial distribution of the incised pottery that is found in the tombs of the Middle and Terminal A-Group from the Second Cataract (high frequency) to northern Lower Nubia (low frequency).<sup>42</sup>

The graves (Fig. 10) themselves are of cultural relevance. The graves are simple pits; the round, oval and sub-rectangular shafts are dug into the alluvial soil in a distance from the floodplain or in khors on a terrace covered with Nile mud. The beehive graves are known from the Early A-Group (ASN 78)<sup>43</sup> and show some alterations in the Terminal A-Group and post-A-Group when the interior walls are mud-plastered and furnished with stone slabs. Rectangular pits are known in the Terminal A-Group mainly in the north of Lower Nubia. In the Middle and Terminal A-Group many of the documented sub-rectangular and rectangular pits are covered with stone-slabs. The pit-and-side-chamber grave represents the early and smaller version of the monumental tombs of the kings at Qustul L (Fig. 11).<sup>44</sup> The oldest examples of this grave-type belong to the Transitional stage, these early examples are known from the cemeteries 99 and 103 at Dakka and ASN 136 at Sayala. Grave ASN 99:68 dating to stage IId also is already covered with stone slabs.<sup>45</sup> The shafts of the main burials in many of the cemeteries are constantly increasing in their dimensions with diameter/length from 2 m to 3 m and more, they are round or sub-rectangular (e.g. ASN 17:50, 17:66, ASN 137:1, ASN 142:1, SJE 298:23, SJE 332:42).<sup>46</sup>

The quantitative parameters grave-types, grave-size, burial goods, burial customs, and the

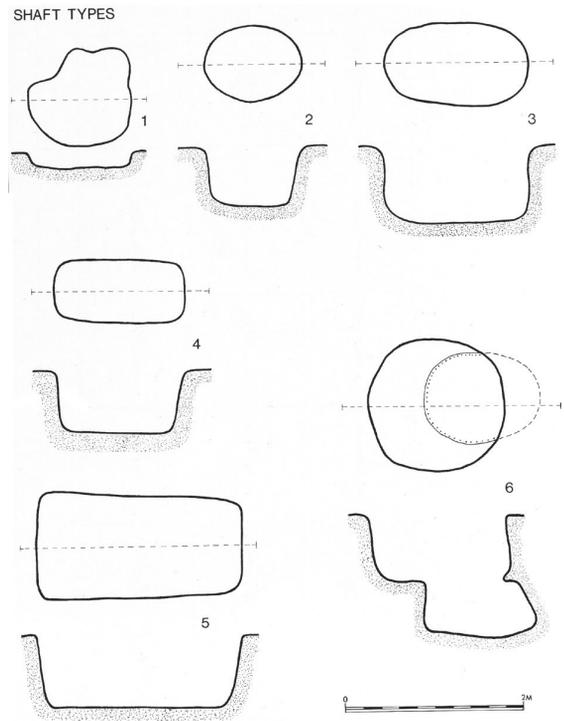


Fig. 10 Types of graves (after NORDSTRÖM 1972, pl. 57).

inventory confirm the uniformity of the material culture and the differences in comparison to other assemblages. The analytically studied contexts give a clear impression of the social structure of the A-Group with its elite, chiefs, and the so-called kingdom of Qustul in the Terminal A-Group. The most important of the re-investigated cemeteries are Khor Bahan (ASN 17) and Dakka (ASN 99, 102, 103) in the Early A-Group, Gerf Hussein (ASN 76, 79) and Sayala (ASN 136, 137, 142, 148) in the Transitional Stage,<sup>47</sup> Middle and Terminal A-Group, and Qustul V, W, S, Q and Qustul L in the Terminal A-Group.<sup>48</sup> The modern reconstruction of the A-Group culture means the thorough analysis of the sites (cemeteries, abris, camp-sites), as well as the classified corpus of object groups, and mostly also the chronological

<sup>42</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972, pl. 2.

<sup>43</sup> FIRTH 1912, 7, fig. 1.

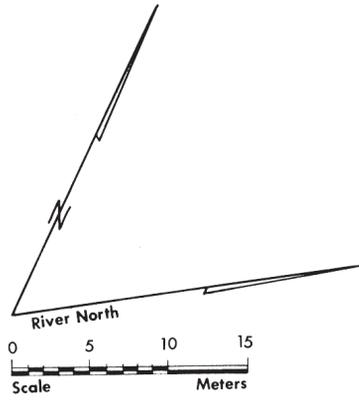
<sup>44</sup> REISNER 1910, 300–302, figs. 244–252, 257; JUNKER 1919, 27–30, Taf. V–XII; EMERY and KIRWAN 1935, 481–482, figs. 451, 453 (type B.1, B.3); NORDSTRÖM 1972, pl. 57. For the pit-and-side-chamber tombs, see FIRTH 1915, 49, fig. 20, 103, fig. 130–131; 1927, 201.

<sup>45</sup> GLÜCK 2007, 18, 32–33, Abb. 3. For the site documentation, see FIRTH 1915, 49, fig. 20.

<sup>46</sup> REISNER 1910, 117–120, 130–132; FIRTH 1927, 207–208; NORDSTRÖM 1972, 154–155, 178–179, pls. 73, 89.

<sup>47</sup> The new investigation of the archaeological material of several sites in Lower Nubia makes it possible to set up a period of time between the Early A-Group and the Middle A-Group, this Transitional Stage/“Übergangsstufe” corresponds with Naqada II(c)-d.

<sup>48</sup> REISNER 1910, 114–141, plan XIV; FIRTH 1927, 199–212, figs. 7–9, plan XI; WILLIAMS 1986; 1989.



Shaft  
Undercut Tomb

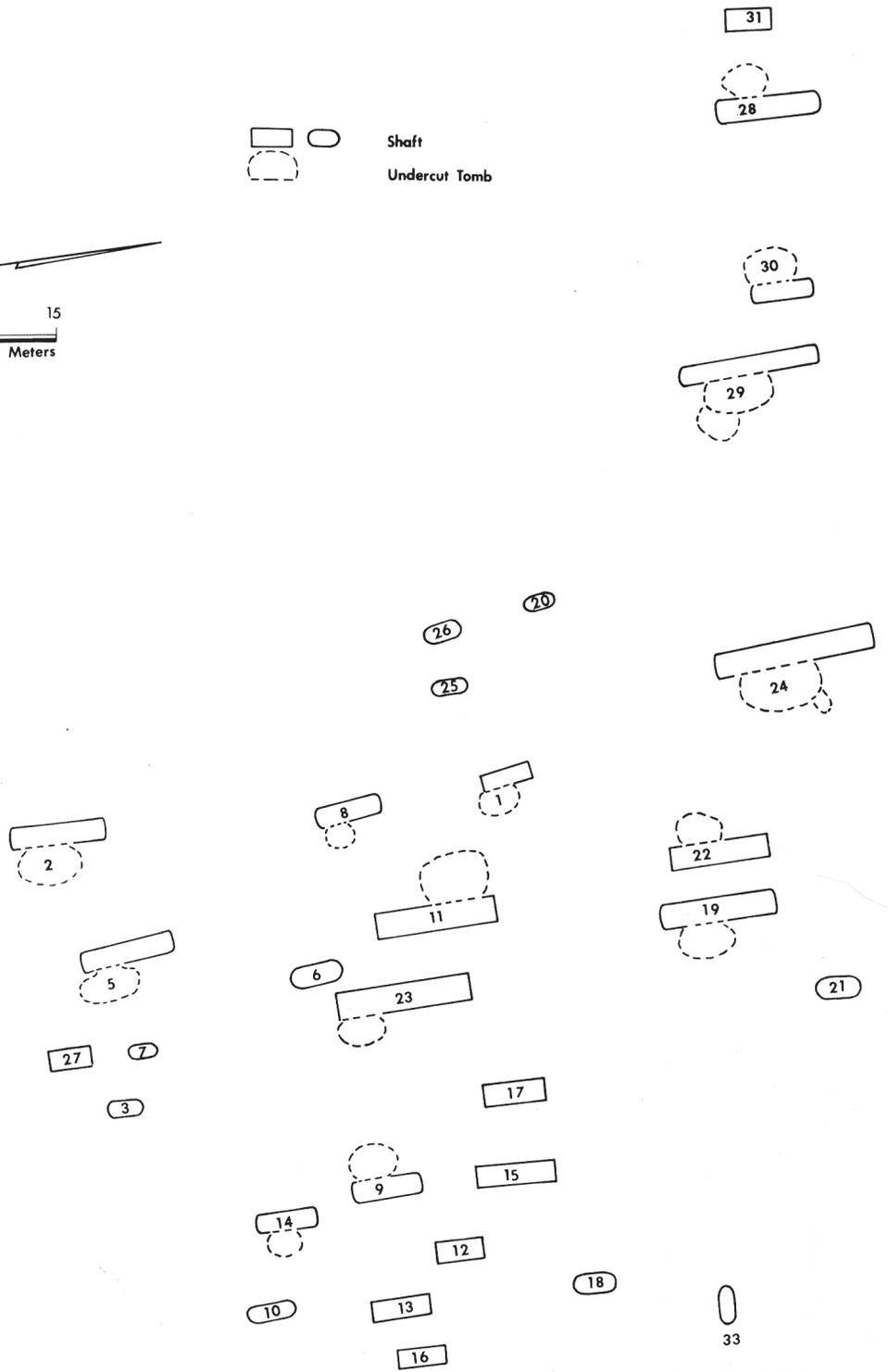


Fig. 11 The royal cemetery Qustul L (after WILLIAMS 1986, pl. 4).

arranging of the contexts and find material in order to reveal the transition between the three consecutive periods. The chronological markers or *index fossils* (e.g. Rippled ware, Painted Eggshell ware of the Middle and Terminal A-Group) fulfil the function of revealing the cultural development of the A-Group, diagnostic items in the pottery series are valid for a certain period of time. Some items like lithic tools are in use for a longer period of time. The grave-types and their grave-goods, the site assemblages and the settlement pattern reveal changes of the material culture or a cultural change between one culture and another, the latter is not the case with the A-Group in Lower Nubia.

### 2b. The cultural assignment.

The semi-pastoral population of Lower Nubia lived on animal husbandry (cattle, sheep, goat), hunting, fishing, and agriculture. Food-production is well-established together with a thoroughly organised distributive system of trade and transport.<sup>49</sup> The centres of the Early, Middle and Terminal A-Group communities shift in the consecutive stages from northern to southern Lower Nubia, and there are several districts that show a concentration of sites: Khor Bahan – Dakka to Sayala, Amada – Qustul and the Second Cataract region.<sup>50</sup> The innovative socio-economic structure of the Middle A-Group with chiefs at Sayala and other places in the south enables economic contacts with the polity rulers of Naqada II–III and the A-Group population that inhabits the Nile valley, the wadi zones and the savannah-like *hinterland* (the Laqiya region).<sup>51</sup> In Nubia cattle-herding is supposed to form the main economic basis, these animals are used both as meat supply and trade goods – as well as prestige goods. Furthermore, the representations of cattle and wild animals (lions, giraffes, elephants, crocodiles) at Sayala and Korosko hint at a religious function of domesticated and wild animals.<sup>52</sup>

Trade starts as a flourishing regional and inter-regional distributive system with the Naqada Culture in Naqada Ic – IIa. The few cemeteries in northern Lower Nubia – Kubania (JUNKERS cemetery and Nag el-Qarmila cemetery and settlement), Khor Bahan and Dakka to mention the most important – with an astounding quantity of high quality Egyptian grave goods (B-, P-, C-, N-ware, stone vessels, slate palettes, maces, flint knives) – include diagnostic Nubian elements like lunates, decorated tusks, jewellery, stone palettes and *Blackmouthed* pottery (BM). These very rich and rich assemblages and the diagnostic items of the earliest graves point to an interesting cultural trait, and methodically pass as a parameter of the very early A-Group near the First Cataract region. It is missing further south in the contemporaneous graves at Dakka, where the characteristic BM ware is the predominant pottery class in the graves.<sup>53</sup> With the great number of wealthy burials we can assume that trade was becoming a decisive subsistence pattern of the A-Group people in the Nile valley. Subsequently the essential stimuli resulting from the trade connections with Upper Egypt establish the basis for the A-Group's prosperity in Lower Nubia. Nubian pottery is found as far north as Hierakonpolis and further to the north, but on a smaller scale than Egyptian imports are attested in Lower Nubia.<sup>54</sup> It can be argued that the economic contacts with the polity rulers and the petty kings of Naqada II–III<sup>55</sup> and the Horus-kings of Dyn. 0 – 1 encouraged the turn to a more sedentary life of the A-Group in the Nile valley and in the wadis (Kubania, Khor Daud), an argument which is confirmed by the rich survey material of the increasing number of the sites after the Early A-Group.<sup>56</sup> The small cemeteries with 30 graves and 30 to 90 graves (SJE 198, 292, 332, 277) as well as the larger necropoleis with 100 and more burials of the Middle and Terminal A-Group (ASN 101/102, Faras) show some degree of social stratification, that is also recognised as a specific

<sup>49</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972, 19–26; TAKAMIYA 2004, 57, n. 57, 58; ROY 2011.

<sup>50</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972, pl. 2; 2004, 141, figs. 5–7. South of Korosko there are new places of socio-economic importance dating to the Middle and Terminal A-Group: Amada – Toshke, EMERY and KIRWAN 1935; Aniba, STEINDORFF 1935; Qustul, WILLIAMS 1986; 1989; Faras, GRIFFITH 1921.

<sup>51</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972, 25–26; LANGE 2003; 2004; 2006; 2006 – 2007; LANGE and NORDSTRÖM 2006; GATTO 2011, 91–92; 2014, 49.

<sup>52</sup> BIETAK and ENGELMAYER 1963; SMITH 1962, 79–90.

<sup>53</sup> NORDSTRÖM 1972, 28; REISNER 1910, 114–141; FIRTH 1915, 46–104.

<sup>54</sup> GATTO 1996; 2003; 2006, 64; see also the vessels of the N-class from the cemeteries of Diospolis and Abydos U, GLÜCK 2007.

<sup>55</sup> C.f. WILKINSON 2000.

<sup>56</sup> WILKINSON 2000; TAKAMIYA 2004.

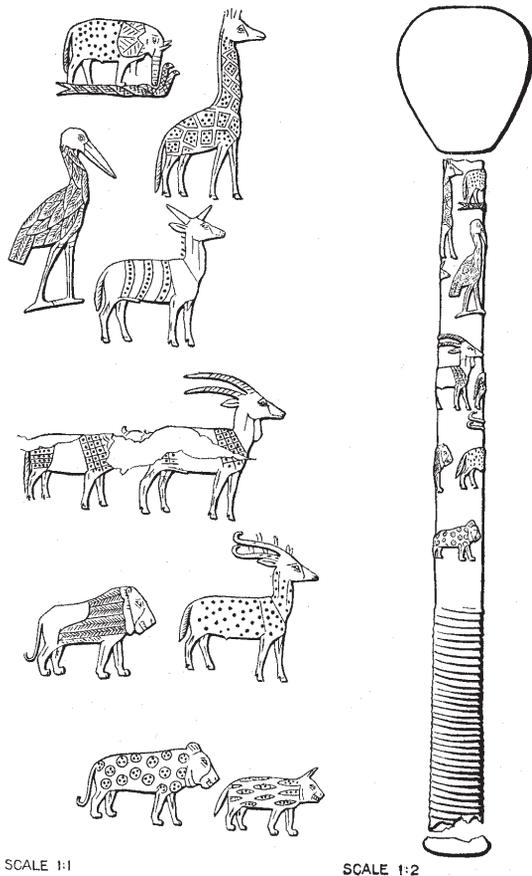


Fig. 12 Mace from Sayala ASN 137:1 (after FIRTH 1927, 205 [fig. 8]).

cultural trait in the investigation; the funeral contexts are classified by the size of the graves, the types of the graves, the amount of the deposited goods, the types of the Nubian pottery, the presence of luxury and/or prestige goods, and the types of imported items. The social stratification differs in the subsequent stages and in some cases there is also a regionally limited repertoire of one or more segments of the material culture (Early A-Group: low, Transitional Stage: high(?), Middle – Terminal A-Group: low/high), periodically there is a marked class distinction to be noted (e.g. Transitional Stage (ASN 136:3) and Middle A-Group (ASN 137:1, 142:1), graves at Qustul L).

The interments of the Early A-Group in ASN 17 are explicit examples of a demographic segment that can be interpreted as leaders, hunters and/or warriors of the A-Group in contrast to the contemporaneous funeral contexts in the Dakka plain, and the graves of the chiefs and their families in ASN 137, 142, 148 that date to the Middle and the Terminal A-Group. The graves of the chiefs and of the elite/nobility in the Middle and Terminal A-Group show exclusive examples of metal objects, maces and some other prestigious items.<sup>57</sup>

The tombs of the nobles are remarkable. The greater measurements of the graves, a visibly enlarged amount of pottery, and prestige and/or status items etc. are features of wealth and distinction. The assemblages include local and foreign prestige items (fishtail knives, maces, cosmetic palettes, D-vessels, W-vessels, ...) and luxury goods (Painted Eggshell ware) that reveal the status of the buried person. The highly complex A-Group is established in the Nile valley with a strong and powerful elite and chiefs. The chiefs' burials are a special cultural phenomenon in the Middle A-Group and Terminal A-Group. The small elite cemeteries in the south like Qustul V, W, L, Faras 3, Serra SJE 298, Ashkeit SJE 332 allow to confirm the regional power and its spatial distribution.<sup>58</sup> Already in the Early A-Group the Nubian burials are easily differentiated by their rich combination of pottery and other valuables. In the Middle A-Group the two maces with the gold-plated handles in the large tomb (2,85 × 1,50 × 1,70 m) of a chief at Sayala ASN 137:1 are diagnostic items<sup>59</sup> and seldomly attested pieces in Lower Nubia. The grave contains status and prestige items including large-sized Egyptian slate palettes, copper tools like axes, adzes, chisels and harpoons, Nubian vessels, Egyptian pottery, and Egyptian stone vessels. The excavated grave-goods and their combinations make a chronological setting to the Naqada IIIa<sub>1(-2)</sub> possible. Another pear-shaped mace was found in Qustul L 24-14. The royal burial is dating to the later Terminal A-Group (IIIc<sub>1,2</sub>/1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty).<sup>60</sup> Both cemeteries are small, they include about 30 graves. The ceramic and stone vessels and their contents (oil, cereals,

<sup>57</sup> REISNER 1910, 114–139, plan XIV, pls. 60, 62–66; FIRTH 1927, 192–216, 220–228, figs. 3, 7–9.

<sup>58</sup> WILLIAMS 1986; 1989; GRIFFITH 1921, 4–18, pls. I–V; NORDSTRÖM 1972, 145–151, 172–182, pls. 65–69, 83–93, 146–147.

<sup>59</sup> FIRTH 1927, 205, fig. 8. The gold-plated handles are covered with a decoration depicting several wild animals in relief.

<sup>60</sup> FIRTH 1927, 205, 207–208, figs. 7, 8, pls. 18.a.b.c.d.f., 20.a., 21a.c. 22.b.; SMITH 1994, 363–372, fig. 1; WILLIAMS 1986, 357–375, pls. 64c, 65a.

cheese, beer and honey) are to be regarded as valuable goods.

The expansion of the Middle and Terminal A-Group as far south as the Second Cataract down to Saras in the Batn el-Hagar is considered as a sort of formative stage that brings the Abkan to an end.<sup>61</sup> The population of Lower Nubia is described as indigenous.<sup>62</sup> Kaiser postulated – in contradiction to Reisner – that there are no traces of a united Predynastic culture in the northern Nile valley in the early 4<sup>th</sup> millennium.<sup>63</sup> The economically important A-Group in Lower Nubia has to be looked upon as a highly complex archaeological group in the northern Nile valley that reflects with its socio-economic and socio-cultural aspects the exchange system of Pre- and Protodynastic Egypt. The trading patterns seem to have undergone a change during the Middle A-Group and the Terminal A-Group due to economic changes in the Naqada II/III in Egypt,<sup>64</sup> therefore the varying amount of quality goods (D-, W-, L-class, copper implements), of luxury goods (Rippled ware, Painted Eggshell ware, quartz palettes), and of prestigious items (ostrich feather fans, incense burners) in the burials of the A-Group has to be taken into account. The general distribution of some pottery type groups, vessel forms and items like quartz palettes leads to the assumption of a fundamental wealth among the A-Group people. The material culture shows a noteworthy development of craft specialisation and its spatial distribution hints at a well-organised distributive system on a regional and inter-regional basis. A detailed analysis of the sites in connection with a clear chronology of the find material from A-Group sites can hopefully show the characteristic elements of the A-Group within its internal chronological stages and periods and with the historical aspect in the Early Dynastic Period. It is obviously clear, that the archaeological, economic/inter-regional and historical aspects of the material culture – despite the few attempts to reconstruct the A-Group culture by Säve-Söderbergh, Nordström and others – remain to be investigated.<sup>65</sup>

The far-reaching trade connections founded a steady prosperity of the inhabitants of Lower Nubia. It seems, however, that especially in the Middle A-Group and Terminal A-Group trade is of utmost importance for the stability of the socio-economic system. In the Terminal A-Group the socio-cultural structure of the A-Group changes to the kingdom of Qustul with cemetery L as the royal necropolis and administrative centres in northern Lower Nubia (Siali ASN 40) and near the Second Cataract (Faras, Ashkeit SJE 332, Saras-West). In each site a seal with locally engraved motives was found (Fig. 13), and we can be sure that the A-Group participated in the trade and administrative system developed in the Naqada Culture.<sup>66</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

The formative process of the Middle A-Group is of particular interest regarding the ecological and demographic aspect of this culture in comparison with the other cultures of the northern Nile valley as well as in its chronological aspect. The lack of centralised authority in Upper Egypt and in the south of Lower Nubia in Naqada IIIa/b supports that the Nubians controlled and financed direct long-distance trade along the Nile and via desert routes to the north and south; the A-Group traded raw materials (cattle, ore/gold, aromatic oils, animal skins, ...) northward in return for Egyptian products (cereals, beer(?), cheese, slate palettes, stone vessels, metal objects, ...) or charged Egyptian traders transit duties.<sup>67</sup> In the time of the ongoing unification process of Egypt, the former frontier at Gebel es-Silsila was established at Aswan. In the Terminal A-Group the kingdom of Qustul has to be considered as an evident economic factor south of the realm of the Protodynastic rulers (Iri-Hor – Hor-Aha) and the early pharaohs of the 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty.<sup>68</sup> The trade-goods found in the kings' burials at Qustul demonstrate a strong (ideological?) bond with Egypt. In the Terminal A-Group few locally produced Nubian representa-

<sup>61</sup> MYERS 1959; 1960; SHINER 1968; NORDSTRÖM 1972, 12–17; 2004, 140–141; 2006, 36–38; GATTO 2011, 88–89; 2014, 47–48.

<sup>62</sup> JUNKER 1919, 2–6; TRIGGER 1976, 32–34; ADAMS 1977, 118–119; NORDSTRÖM 1972, 28; SMITH 1991, 92.

<sup>63</sup> KAISER 1957, 74; REISNER 1910, 319.

<sup>64</sup> KAISER 1990, 294.

<sup>65</sup> SÄVE-SÖDERBERGH 1941, 5–10; NORDSTRÖM 1972; WILLIAMS 1986; 1989.

<sup>66</sup> WILLIAMS 1986, 168–171, fig. 58; NORDSTRÖM 1972, 117–118. For the exchange systems and trade in the Predynastic and Early Dynastic Nile valley see TAKAMIYA 2004; ROY 2011.

<sup>67</sup> TRIGGER 1976, 44–46; ADAMS 1977, 136–137; NORDSTRÖM 1972, 25–26.

<sup>68</sup> C.f. TAKAMIYA 2004, 58, n. 60; ROY 2011.

tions in connection with the royal and/or funeral sphere are known from glyptic examples like seal impressions found on jars in burials (Fig. 13) and the Qustul Incense Burner. Despite the change from relative to historical chronology in Egypt there is little written evidence from Early Dynastic objects mentioning “Ta-Seti”, furthermore, warlike activities in Nubia are reported (ivory tablet of Hor Aha, Gebel Sheikh Suliman) that leaves us with a period nearly void of people in Lower Nubia.<sup>69</sup>

As is evidenced by the find material, the exchange system in Nubia was brought to an end in the course of the early 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty. At the same time Egypt’s transactions in Southern Palestine came to a halt. The A-Group’s disappearance in Lower Nubia<sup>70</sup> due to the almost total break-down

of the demise of the socio-economic structure but also as a result of military activities of the Naqada kings may have led to a partial incorporation of the Nubian population in the territory of the Two Lands, where the A-Group leaves unmistakable traces of their influence in the uprising of the Pharaonic state:

- a distributive system, an efficiency in organisation for obtaining prestige goods and exchanging exotic materials (the system of reciprocity is well-integrated in the social structure of the A-Group).
- large-scale trade (ointments, ebony, ivory, animal skins ...). Only in the Old Kingdom Egypt took over the economic organisation to carry on direct trade with the south.

In the early 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty the pharaoh as the sole figure of centralised transactions and welfare (as well as the Horus-kings before Hor-Aha) may have incorporated the A-Group of Lower Nubia in the system of political order, since the Terminal A-Group was an era of marked prosperity recognisable in the sites, also in the spatial distribution of the settlement sites especially in the far south. Administration centres and trading-stations like Afia and Buhen are in existence in the Early Dynastic period and the early Old Kingdom (Buhen) respectively.<sup>71</sup>

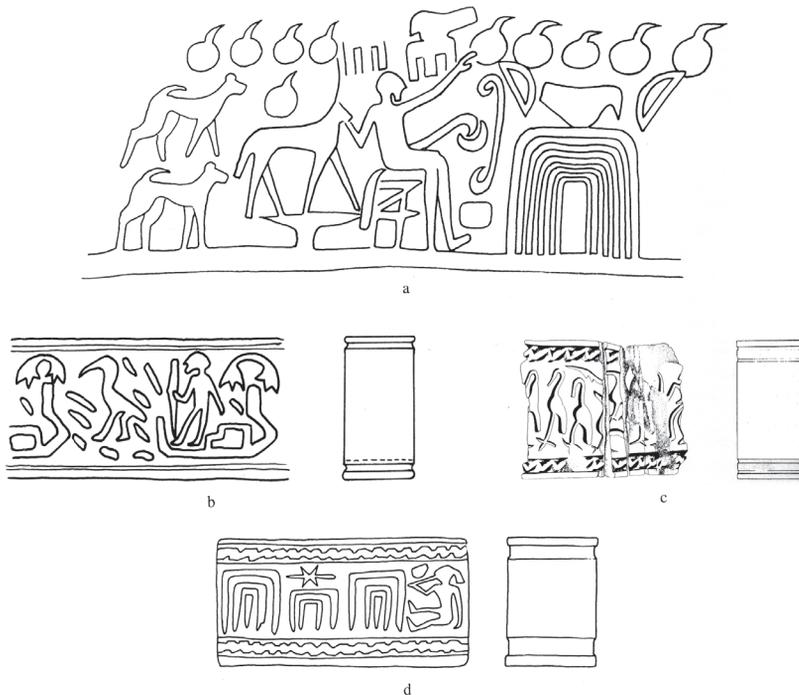


Fig. 13 Ivory seals from Siali ASN 40:43, Saras-W, Qusturl L 17, Faras (after WILLIAMS 1986, 168 [fig. 58]).

<sup>69</sup> SAVE-SODERBERGH 1941, 7–8, n. 3, 4, 6 (= PETRIE 1901b, pls. III.2, XI.1; QUIBELL 1902, pl. LVIII); ARKELL 1950; WILLIAMS 1986, 138–146, 167–172, figs. 54–56, 58, 59, pl. 34.

<sup>70</sup> The virtually desolated region of Lower Nubia after the 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty is generally explained by Egyptian military raids, c.f. the mentioning of “*Ta-seti*” in Early Dynastic histori-

cal texts, SAVE-SODERBERGH 1941, 6–8; for the collapse of the trading-network of the A-Group, c.f., NORDSTRÖM 1972, 31–32.

<sup>71</sup> SMITH 1962, 58–61; LAL 1967; GATTO 2006, 66, tab. 1; GRATIEN 1995; O’CONNOR 2014.

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