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EL-AR 31: EXCAVATIONS OF LATE/POST-MEROITIC TUMULI. PRELIMINARY REPORT

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Abstract: Preliminary report on the findings from the excavation in 2009 of four tumuli (Nos 31a–31d) from a late Meroitic/post-Meroitic tumuli field in El-Ar 31, a site in the Fourth Cataract region. The project was carried out by an expedition from the Poznań Archaeological Museum, operating in the concession of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw, as part of the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project. All the graves had been plundered, but incompletely, leaving some pottery and beads from the original grave goods.

Keywords: Fourth Cataract, El-Ar, Meroitic, post-Meroitic, tumuli

The site of El-Ar 31 is a late Meroitic/post-Meroitic tumuli field situated on the gebel in the desert south of El-Ar village (N 19°27'12.4" E32°55'39.2", about 311 m a.s.l.). It was located during the 2007 survey of the Poznań expedition (Chłodnicki *et alii* 2010: 392–393) in an area where multiple sites represented different periods, from prehistory to the Christian age (Krzyżaniak *et alii* 2005: 39). The cemetery is one of the multiple tumuli fields in the region. It consists of approximately 30 tumuli, all measuring from 6 to 11 m in diameter. Cavities in the tops of all of the tumuli indicated that they had been violated by robbers. Four of the tumuli were explored in January 2009 by an expedition from the Poznań Archaeological Museum, operating in the concession of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw, as part of the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage

Project (for the team's general report, see Chłodnicki 2012, in this volume).

EXCAVATION OF TUMULI

The tumuli superstructures comprised mounds of sand and gravel. Graves 31a and 31d represented MDASP type FT01a (Borcowski, Welsby 2009: 2–3) and mound type I, a pure gravel mound fully or partly covered with small stones (Lemiesz 2007: 369–370). Tumulus 31b could be attributed to type FT02a (Borcowski, Welsby 2009: 2–3) and mound type 2, that is, circular gravel-covered mound with internal stone ring (Lemiesz 2007: 369–370). Tumulus 31c was classified as type FT03b with a ring of piled rubble reveting a low mound (Borcowski, Welsby 2009: 2–3).

The following table juxtaposes the principal features of the four excavated graves.

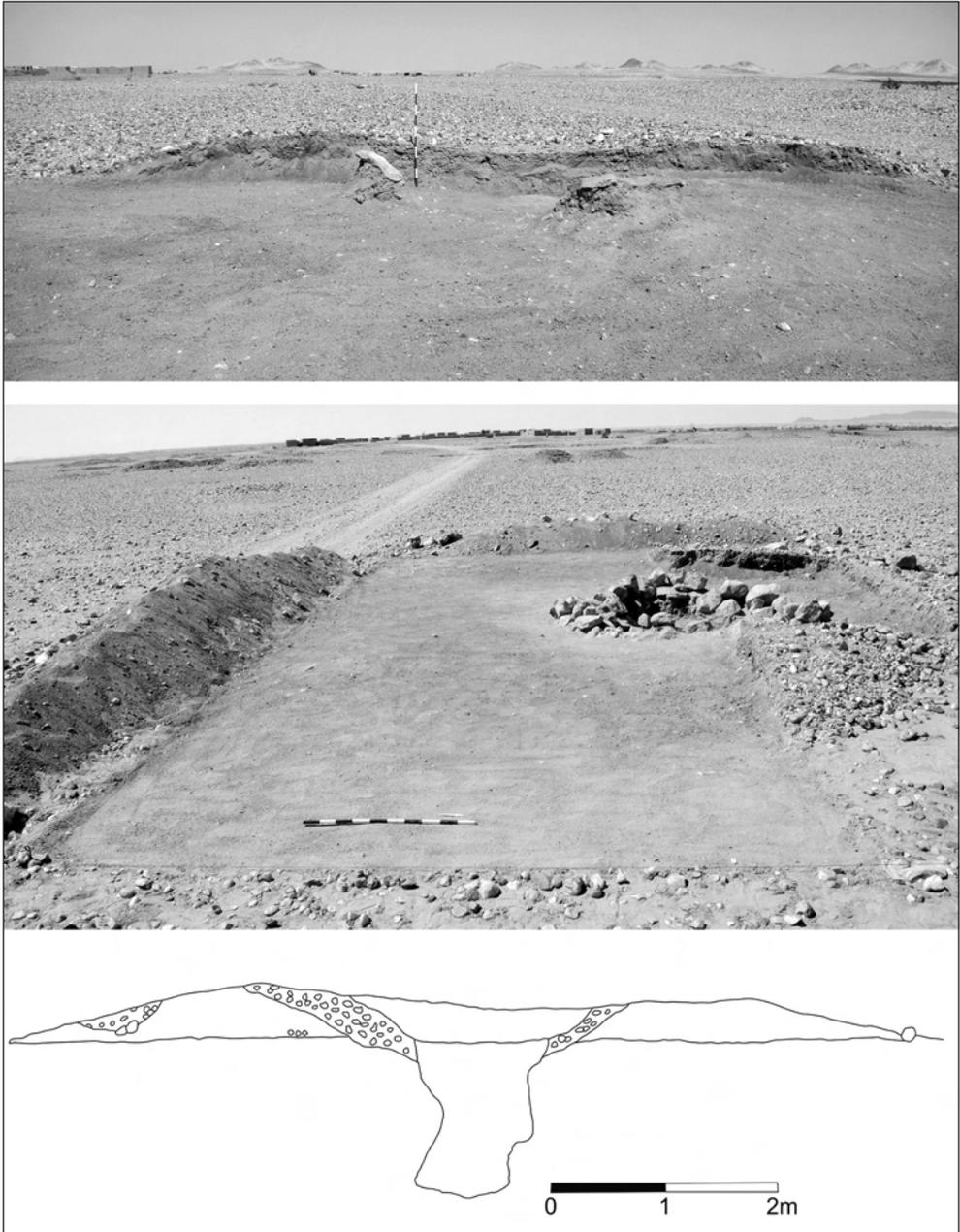


Fig. 1. The tumuli in El-Ar 31: top, section through tumulus 31a, view to the north; middle, general view of tumulus 31b in the foreground (during excavations) and tumulus 31d on the other side of the track; bottom, section through tumulus 31c (Photos A. Buszek, M. Kurzyk; drawing A. Buszek)

GRAVE 31a

The tumulus was 11.20 m in diameter with a superstructure of sand and stones 0.50 m high and a chamber 1.50 m deep [Fig. 1, top]. It had been robbed in antiquity through a trench traced on the top of the mound. Two ceramic shovels (one in the shaft and one in the chamber)

constituted further evidence of plunder. The shaft had been covered with huge stones, which had partly collapsed into it. The chamber contained the skeleton of a woman about 35–40 years old, the bones well preserved but the skeleton disarticulated (pelvis and vertebrae together next to the skull) [Fig. 2, top left]. About 300 beads made of ostrich eggshell, measuring either 1.07 cm (240 pieces) or 0.72 cm (about 60) in diameter, were scattered in the burial chamber, together with fragments of beer jars with impressed textile decoration and a complete pottery vessel [Fig. 4:a–c]. There was also an iron ring [Fig. 3, top left]. Leather with remains of stitching was preserved on the bones.

[AB]



Fig. 2. Disarticulated skeletons in the four burial chambers: top left, grave 31a; middle left, grave 31b; bottom left, grave 31c; right, grave 31d, including shaft (Photos A. Buszek, M. Kurzyk)

GRAVE 31b

The gravel and sand mound of the tumulus was about 9 m in diameter [Fig. 1, middle]. After removing the south part (which was 9 m wide and 4.50 m long) and digging a trench 4 m wide and 2 m long in the north part of the mound, a circular structure with inner stone revetment was revealed. Its presence had already been suggested by the remains seen on top of the mound prior to the excavations.

The burial chamber was found in a pit 1.50 m deep. Human bones in very poor condition were found in non-anatomical position [Fig. 2, middle left]. The anthropologist, M. Stanaszek, identified the skeleton as that of a young woman (adult, 18–20 years old), buried in the fifth month of pregnancy. The grave goods consisted of bracelets [Fig. 3, bottom right]: some made of ostrich eggshell and faience beads, some solely of ostrich eggshell beads, and others of carnelian and agate(?) beads. Just one piece of pottery and residual material (cloth) were found.

[MK]

GRAVE 31c

The tumulus was 10 m in diameter with a superstructure 0.60 m high and a chamber 1.70 m deep. The superstructure was composed of sand and stones [Fig. 1, bottom]. Robbing in ancient times was attested by the outlines of a robbery shaft and by a pottery shovel found in the shaft. The shaft was not covered by any stone structure, but there was a line of stones around the tumulus. The skeleton of a woman about 45–50 years old was found in the burial chamber [Fig. 2, bottom left]. The bones were in good condition but the skeleton was not in anatomical position. A great quantity of beads was discovered [Fig. 3, center left] —about 240 beads made of ostrich eggshell, four of faience, a few glass beads of different shapes and one stone teardrop-shaped bead. One vessel with impressed textile decoration was recovered [Fig. 4:d-e]. Remains of a fire, that is, charcoal and fragments of a vessel, were found below the superstructure, in the southwestern part of the grave.

[AB]

Table 1. Juxtaposition of graves from the El-Ar 31 site, excavated in 2009

Grave no.	Mound diameter.	Mound layout.	Structure	Grave goods
31a	~ 11.20	Circular	Sand-gravel mound	Beads, vessel, fragments of two other vessels, iron ring
31b	~ 9	Circular	Sand-gravel mound with stone revetment	Beads, pottery, residual material
31c	~ 10	Circular	Sand-gravel mound with stone revetment	Beads, vessel, fragments of another vessel
31d	~ 6	Circular	Sand-gravel mound	Bowl, jug, beads, half of an iron ring



Fig. 3. Selection of grave goods from the tumuli: top left, iron ring from grave 31a; top right, glass bead covered with remains of gold foil; center, beads of ostrich eggshell, glass, faience and stone from grave 31c; bottom right, beads of ostrich eggshell from grave 31b (Photos M. Jawornicki)

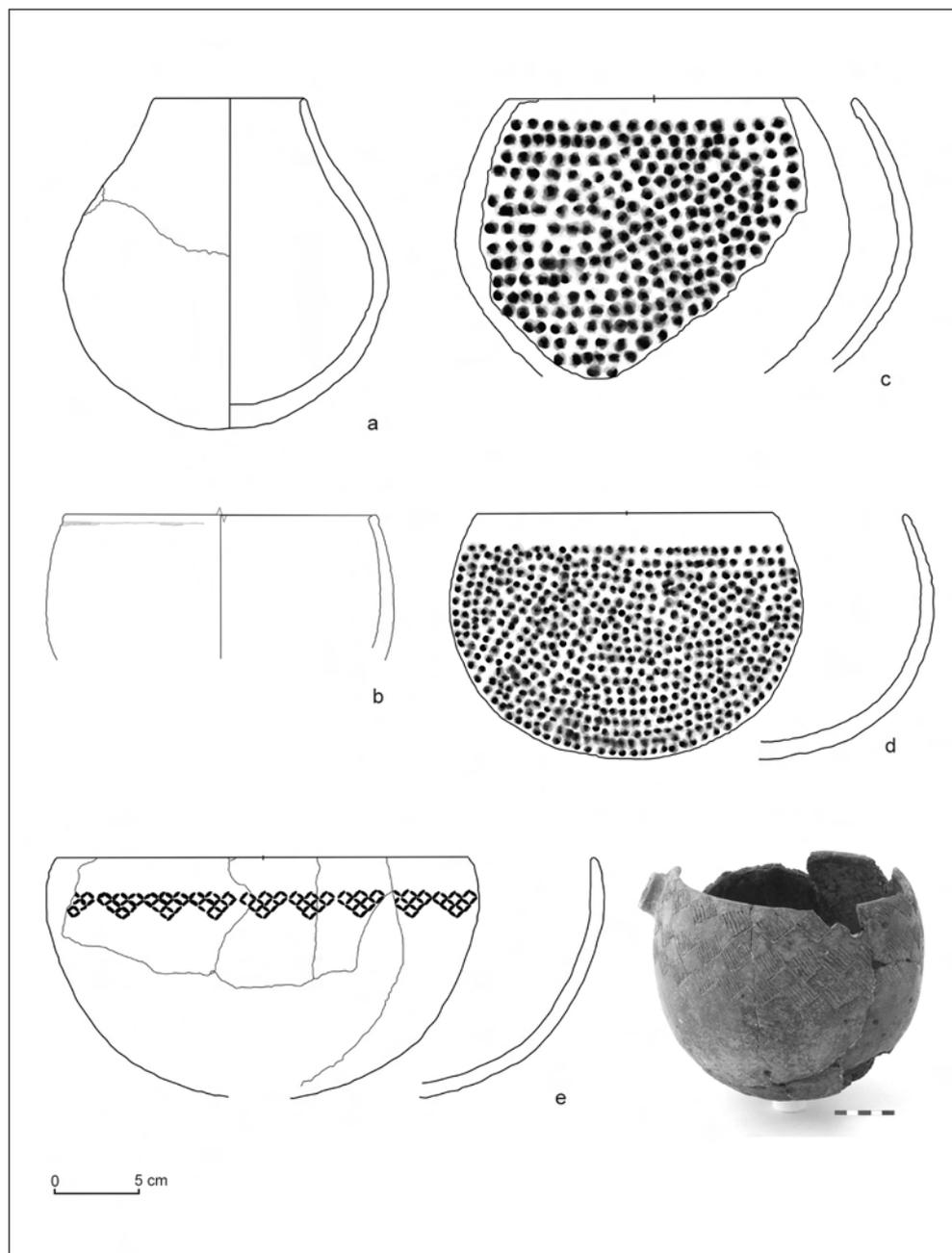


Fig. 4. Selection of pottery from the tumuli: a–c – grave 31a; d–e – grave 31c; bottom right, decorated spouted bowl from grave 31d (Drawing A. Buszek; photo M. Jawornicki)

GRAVE 31d

The fourth tumulus was a sand-and-gravel mound about 6 m in diameter. There was no stone revetment. The shaft was explored after the southern half of the mound and a rectangular section from its northern part had been removed. Half of an iron ring was found in the shaft. A very well preserved skeleton was revealed inside the burial chamber. The body, most likely of a girl 10–12 years old, was lying on its left side, in fetal position [*Fig. 2*, top right]. The grave was furnished with two large ceramic bowls, one of them spouted, both in a poor state of preservation. The bowl with a spout [*Fig. 4*, bottom right] was decorated in the upper half with three rows of zigzag or checkered pattern consisting of hatched lozenges. The small holes along one of the cracks suggested that the bowl had been repaired prior to being deposited in the tumulus. The fill of the burial chamber also yielded six glass beads, one of which was covered with remains of gold foil [*Fig. 3*, top right], while another

had what looked like remains of white gold foil.

[MK]

CONCLUSIONS

Parallels appear to be multiple between the graves from the El-Ar 31 archaeological site and the tumuli from Hagar el-Beida 1 and 2 and from El-Sadda 1. These sites were burial places for people inhabiting the area during the first centuries AD (Lemiesz 2007: 368–373; Longa 2008: 75–84; Osypiński 2007: 348–363).

The grave shafts were always situated under the central part of the mound. All of the burials had been plundered, but the remnants of grave goods that had been left behind and the form of the tumuli indicated a date in late Meroitic or post-Meroitic times. More significantly, all four of the tumuli contained burials of women. However, in view of the limited area of the site covered by excavations, one cannot conclude from this that there were separate places for men and women in this cemetery.

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