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HAGAR EL-BEIDA 1 EXCAVATIONS OF A LATE/POST-MEROITIC CEMETERY

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The site of Hagar el-Beida 1 (HB1) is a large tumulus cemetery located in the immediate vicinity of the Hagar el-Beida village (N19°19'14.7" E032°45'46.4"). The site consists of 15 huge and medium-sized tumuli preserved on the surface, arranged in two distinct and easily recognizable groups: A (eight burials spread on a lightly eroded alluvial rocky-and-gravel slope along the southern outskirts of the village) and B (six superstructures situated on a large, plain sandy elevation, currently around the local soccer-field between modern houses).

The site was discovered in 2003 during an archaeological reconnaissance of the Fourth Cataract area and then provisionally recorded in late 2004.[1] At the time of the first prospection, archaeologists focused attention on the largest superstructure in the cemetery (HB1-T10), which they referred to as "royal" burial because of its size. It may very well be the most spectacular historical feature so far discovered within the area of the Polish concession. However, the sheer size of this burial, now estimated at c. 32 m in diameter (up from the previous estimate of 28 m) and a maximum of 6 m in height, did not allow anything but some standard initial surveying and measurements during the first season of excavation in 2005. Following two weeks of initial earthworks, the upper part of the eastern half of the mound was removed down to about two-thirds of its height. Four other relatively well preserved tumuli, representing some prominent differences in size and shape, were selected for excavation and explored between January 30 and March 6 [*Table 1*].

Although too few of the tumuli in this cemetery have been excavated so far to acknowledge them as a distinctly representative sample, the following remarks on hypothetical variants and typology are put forward with all due caution [*Table 2*].

SUPERSTRUCTURES

The superstructures are varied in diameter and three main types can be distinguished:[2] small tumuli (max. 11 m, e.g. T3), medium-sized ones (from 12 to 18 m, e.g. T2, T6, T7 and T13) and large ones (more than 18 m, e.g. T1, T5, T9 and T14). The height ranges from 0.80 m for the small

1 L. Krzyżaniak, M. Chłodnicki, M. Jórdeczka, M. Lemiesz, "Archaeological reconnaissance between Shemkhiya and Khor Umm Ghizlan (left bank of the Nile), 2003", *GAMAR* 4 (2005), 42; M. Chłodnicki, *PAM XVI, Reports 2004* (2005), 372, 375 and Fig. 4.

2 The "royal tumulus" HB1/T10 must remain outside this simple classification owing to its size and presumed predominant role in the necropolis.

Table. 1. Juxtaposition of features of tumuli from the Hagar el-Beida 1 site, excavated in 2005

Tumulus	HB1/T5	HB1/T6	HB1/T7	HB1/T9
		SUPERSTRUCTURE		
Mound diameter	19.50 m	14 m	17.50 & 13.50 m	21.50 m
Mound layout	round	round	slightly oblong (E-W)	round
Height (preserved)	1.45 m	1.10 m	1.10 m	1.40 m
Construction	sand-gravel	sand-gravel with stone kerb	sand-gravel	sand-gravel with stone kerb
		SUBSTRUCTURE		
Orientation	E-W	NW-SE	SW-NE	NW-SE
Shaft type	ramp-shaft (dromos) with mud-brick construction	oval with stone blockage	roughly rectangular with stone blockage	roughly rectangular with stone blockage
Chamber layout	L-shaped	Oval	L-shaped	L-shaped
		BURIAL		
Body position and orientation	N?	SE?	SE?	SW?
Grave goods	3 vessels, jewelry (beads), iron	2 + 5 vessels, jewelry (beads), iron	2 vessels, jewelry (beads), iron	+ 8 vessels, jewelry (beads), iron

mounds to about 1.40 m for the big ones. None of the tumuli was observed to have an external skirt or kerb construction.[3] The mounds are roughly round in plan, except for two slightly sub-round tumuli T7 and T11; however, in these cases the current shape of the superstructure has proved to be the result of long-lasting erosion. All mounds were constructed of diagonally sprinkled layers of dusty or sandy silt alternating with thin layers of dark granulated silt, deposited above a core in the form of a small heap (max. about 2.50 m in diameter) of light yellow gravel with pebbles. Originally, the surface may have been loosely clad with pebbles and gravel (the material locally swept from the ground), however nowadays no coat has been noticed except for some remains accumulated mostly around the exposed summit.

Apart from secondary size differences, the grave superstructures can be divided by their internal construction features into two main types:

Mound type 1: pure-gravel mound, fully or partly covered with small stones. This variant is comparable to form I.6 in the

3 As opposed to the tumuli in the Hagar el-Beida 2 cemetery situated in a nearby wadi.

typology proposed by the Gdańsk Archaeological Museum Expedition (GAME),[4] and especially to Welsby's Type I.[5]

Mound type 2: gravel-covered mound with internal stone kerb, not circular but with a ledge (generally ovaloid in shape). Some similarities between this type and GAME's form I.3[6] or Welsby's Type II can be pointed out, although it must be stressed that in this particular case no evidence of the kerb is visible on the surface, making it impossible to discern between types 1 and 2.

SUBSTRUCTURES

The substructures of the tumuli are differentiated as well, with two main groups having been distinguished:

Substructure type I: represented to date by a solitary tomb HB1-T5 with a shallow, trapezoid descent (dromos-like ramp), sloping gently to an L-shaped rock-cut chamber reinforced with a mud-brick construction.

Substructure type II: The most common element of this is a roughly rectangular shaft, cut vertically in alluvial rock and filled with pure sand and gravel. Another highly distinctive feature is the use of massive, flat and oblong stones of local provenience to secure the entrance to the chamber.[7] The chamber itself can be roughly oval (variant A, as in HB1-T6) or L-shaped (HB1-T7, HB1-T9) with an oblong main burial niche and a kind of perpendicular annex.

Fig. 1. Hagar el-Beida 1. Excavations of tumuli 1 and 9; the latter, a satellite burial of the "royal" mound, in the foreground (Photo M. Lemiesz)

4 H. Paner, Z. Borcowski, "Gdańsk Archaeological Museum Expedition. A summary of eight season's work at the Fourth Cataract", *GAMAR* 4 (2005), 110, Fig. 36.4.

5 D.A. Welsby, Survey above the Fourth Nile Cataract (London 2003), 122.

6 Paner, Borcowski, op. cit., Fig. 35,2.

7 For HB1-T9 the total weight of the measured blockage was in the whereabouts of 1.8 tons.

Table 2. Preliminary classification of tumuli from the Hagar el-Beida 1 site

Tumulus	HB1/T5	HB1/T6	HB1/T7	HB1/T9
Superstructure	Type 1	Type 2	Type 1	Type 2
Shaft	Type I	Type II	Type II	Type II
Burial chamber	Variant B	Variant A	Variant B	Variant B

LOCATION OF CEMETERY AND DISTRIBUTION OF BURIALS

It is difficult to say whether the choice of location on the HB1 cemetery was determined by burial tradition more than practical considerations, but the topographical setting seems to play an important role, since – typically of Late Meroitic and Post-Meroitic tradition – the HB1 cemetery was located on flat, sandy ground.

Although it must be stressed that using the terms "rich" and "poor" with reference to the burials on the site of Hagar el-Beida 1 should be rather conservative and symbolic in character, the stone-kerbed superstructures can be associated with a relatively more plentiful choice of grave goods, since both of the Type 2 tumuli were undoubtedly better furnished, while those identified as pure-gravel mounds of Type 1 contained little more than a few vessels each. Moreover, in graves of Type 2, some vessels were probably intentionally placed on top of the blocking in the shaft: wheel-made cup in HB1-T9 and two broken vessels (broken ritually?) in HB1-T6. This practice has been considered as part of the funeral rituals revived in the Fourth Cataract area in Late Meroitic times.[8]

The "richly" furnished grave T9 seems to have played a specific role, perhaps interpreted as a kind of satellite burial, forming a larger funerary complex together with the dominant "royal tumulus" [*Fig.1*], located at a distance of no more than 25 m to the north. However, since no other satellite superstructure or remains of one have been noted during a thorough survey of the area, there is no evidence for the existence of a hypothetical zone reserved for the tribal elite, buried in the vicinity of their ruler's tomb.

GRAVE FURNISHING AND CHRONOLOGY

Regardless of the tumuli's state of preservation, the total number and variety of grave goods retrieved from the tumuli is relatively poor, seemingly in contrast to the laboriousness and size of the superstructures. Metal objects are apparently unpopular as a category, even compared to similarly dated cemeteries in the area (i.e., Hagar el-Beida 2 and Es-Sadda 1). Dominating the few finds of metal were nondescript iron implements, too corroded for reconstruction, probably arrowheads or knife blades. Faience, glazed and stone beads, as well as ostrich eggshell and bone

8 M. El-Tayeb, E. Kołosowska, "Burial traditions on the right bank of the Nile in the Fourth Cataract region", *GAMAR* 4 (2005), 66.

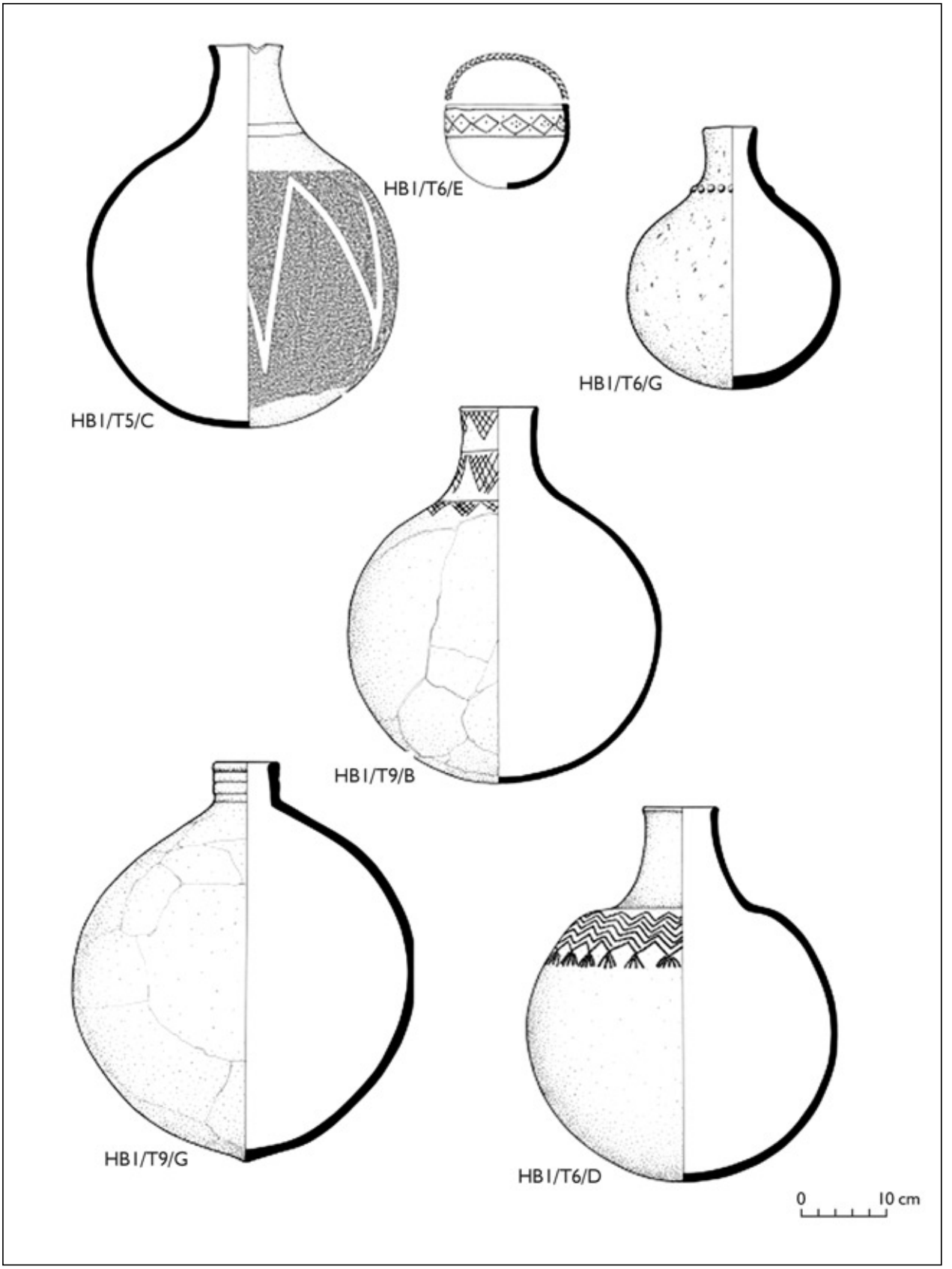

Fig. 2. Pottery from the tumuli in Hagar el-Beida 1 (Drawing M. Lemiesz)

necklaces were found in huge quantity and variety, but they are hardly diagnostic for burial chronology.

The pottery {*Fig. 2*} is varied as well (establishing an internal site fabric typology will be a research priority for an upcoming season). Huge jars (including so-called beer-jars), some with textile imprints or incised ornaments, can be recognized as typical alternatively of Post-Meroitic or Late Meroitic contexts. A handmade globular pot with incised herring-bone decoration (HB1/T9/I) has been classified by Adams as post-Meroitic domestic ware,[9] but this same burial contained also an orange-ware wheel-made jar HB1/T9/G, which is attributed to the well-defined group of Meroitic wares known from the Gabati cemetery.[10] On the whole, however, the ceramic material seems to be connected preferably with the terminal Meroitic period.

A ramp with vertical shaft and perpendicular side chamber, such as in HB1-T5, was popular in central Sudan in both the Late and Post-Meroitic periods.[11] In the Fourth Cataract region, these features (described as "compound burials" at Ab Heregil) have been regarded as more typical of Late Meroitic cemeteries.[12] On the other hand, for substructure type II (rectangular, vertically cut shaft) a close analogy is found among published burials from Kassinger Bahri[13] and el-Haraz.[14]

The human remains from the hitherto explored graves of the HB1 cemetery were preserved in extremely poor condition, especially compared to the state of burials found in contemporary cemeteries in the vicinity (Hagar el-Beida 2 and Es-Sadda 1). The apparent long-lasting waterlogging of the chambers was responsible for a complete disintegration of the bones. Crushed fragments were scattered on the chamber floors and only in tomb HB1-T6 was a part of a thorax preserved in what looked to be an anatomical arrangement.

9 W.Y. Adams, "Ceramic Industries of Medieval Nubia" (Lexington 1986), 47-50, 411-423, Fig. 247.5

10 Gabati. A Meroitic, Post-Meroitic and Medieval Cemetery in Central Sudan, vol. 1, ed. D.N. Edwards (London 1998), 146, Fig. 6.18

11 P. Lenoble, "Trois tombes de la region de Meroe", *Archéologie du Nil Moyen* 2 (1987), 111-115; Gabati, op. cit., 15-52, Figs 2.3-10

12 El-Tayeb, Kołosowska, op. cit., 65-66, Fig. 24.

13 H. Paner, "The Hamdab Dam Project. Preliminary report of results from work in the Fourth Cataract region, 1996-1997", *GAMAR* 1 (1998), 126-129, Figs 17, 21-22

14 A.M. Abdel Rahman, H. Kabashy, "Two seasons in the Fourth Cataract Region. Preliminary results", *Sudan & Nubia* 3 (1999), 65-66, Fig. 10