

# Bogdan T. Żurawski

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## Shemkhiya 2006

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Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean 19, 369-375

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2010

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# SHEMKHIYA 2006/2007

Bogdan T. Żurawski

*The fourth season of the PCMA effort in the Fourth Cataract Region under the MDASP Salvage Project ran from 29 November 2006 to 30 January 2007 and concentrated on the Shemkhiya area. The present report concerns fieldwork by a team organized by the PCMA and directed by the present author.<sup>1</sup>*

*About 100 new sites were registered in the area southeast of the fortress of El-Ar around the Sabrat el-Kalakil, which is the historic designation for the El-Ar rock. Of these, 22 were surveyed, sampled, measured and mapped, intentionally leaving for later the region to be affected by the dam [map in Fig. 1]. Twelve sites were excavated. Altogether, 41 tumuli and cairn graves were explored (from two to nine at the most from a single cemetery). Reconnoitering of the area south of Tanta Island was continued on a limited scale, giving priority to the lowest lying ground. Follow-up work at the sites of the Christian cemetery SH9 and the tentative church at SH10 near el-Meghera (Żurawski 2008b: XXX–YYY) had to be postponed to the next season. The results of the season were presented during the Lille Conference (22–23 June 2007) and duly published in the conference papers (Żurawski 2008a; Włodarska 2008; Woźniak 2008).*

*Moreover, the gold rush in Gebel el-Gurgurib, which started in the autumn of 2006 after an auriferous vein had been hit in Wadi el-Akhla [cf. Fig. 1], while a hindrance for the fieldwork in unexpected ways, provided interesting ethnographical insight into the process of gold mining (for description and illustrations, cf. Żurawski 2008a: Figs 2, 3).*

1 The Shemkhiya 2006/2007 Mission was financed jointly by the PCMA and the Packard Humanities Institute. The team comprised Dr. Bogdan T. Żurawski, Project director, archaeologist; Anna Błaszczuk, Ewa Kuciewicz (Rock Art Study Unit, Poznań Archaeological Museum), Alicja Płaskowska, Anastazja Stupko, Elżbieta Szewczyk, Magdalena Włodarska, Magdalena Woźniak, archaeologists and documentalists; Łukasz Maurycy Stanaszek, anthropologist; Roman Łopaciuk, topographer; Fathiya Abd El Rahman, NCAM inspector.

The downriver part of the PCMA concession fell traditionally to the Poznań Archaeological Museum and is reported on separately in this volume (see below, Chłodnicki *et alii*: page 375ff).

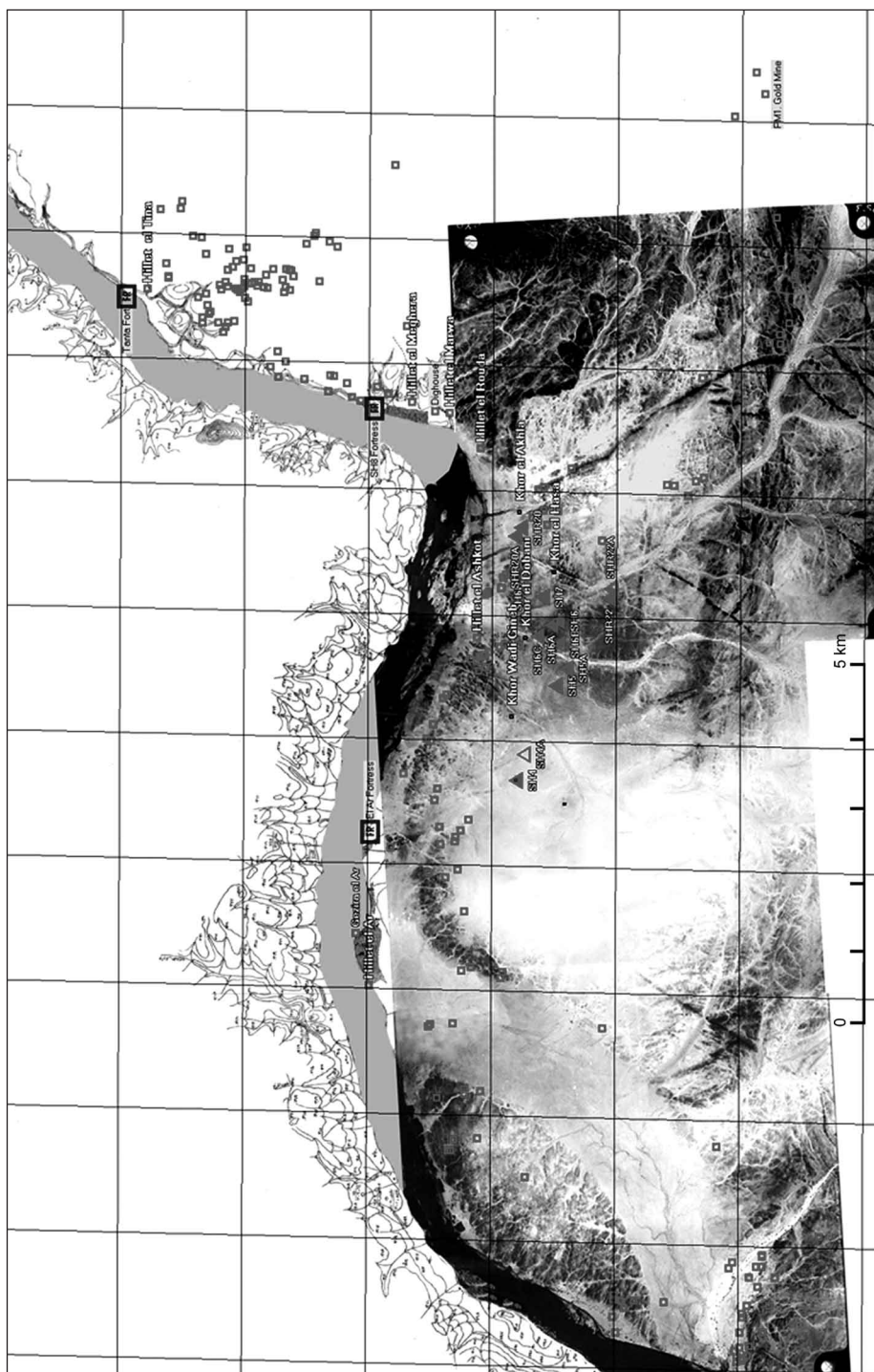


Fig. 1. Map of Shemkhiya area aggregated with aerial view. Left-bank sites visited in 2006/2007 marked with squares; triangles indicate cemeteries explored in 2006/2007 (Processing B. Żurawski)

## LATE MEROITIC TUMULUS BURIALS (SITE SH5)

The site SH5 lies 12 km from the Nile, 10 km east of the Sahrat el-Kalakil in the fork of the Khor Wadi Gineb and Khor el-Dobani. It could have been connected with the mammoth Khor el-Hasa that runs far to the south [cf. *Fig. 1*]. Excavations in February 2006 uncovered six tombs (Żurawski 2008b: 434–436), to which nine more were added in the reported season [*Fig. 2*]. All of them had been disturbed in the past.

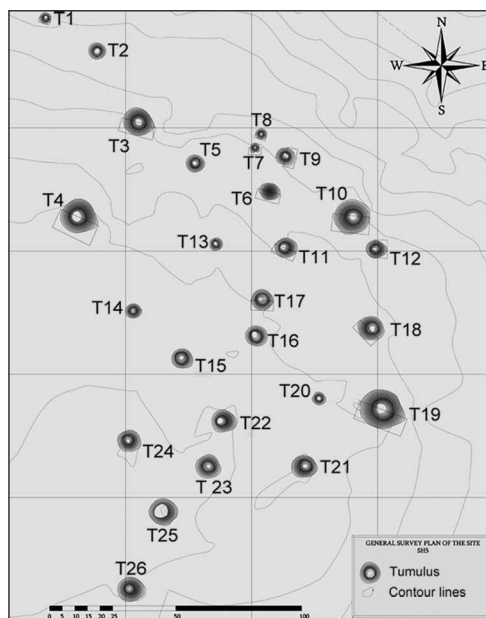
No single pattern can be said to govern the construction of the tombs. The mounds were round or ovoid in shape, provided, but seldom, with kerbs. Burial chambers took on all possible shapes from oval to subrectangular with the entrance always from the east. No traces of food offerings, especially animal bones, were found, either outside or inside the burial chambers. In the currently excavated group the majority of the graves belonged, as before, to women and children under six years of age. There does not seem to have been any difference in the grave goods deposited in the adult and the children's graves, although in size they were naturally smaller. The ceramics found this season are undoubtedly of Meroitic manufacture and date from the 2nd through the 4th centuries AD. There are more wheel-thrown tablewares and containers and much fewer kitchen wares and other vessels with heat absorbers at the bottom than in the standard post-Meroitic assemblage.

Wherever a skeleton was found undisturbed or slightly disturbed, the body was laid out on the left side, in contracted position, the head more or less to the south and facing west.

The body in tomb SH1 had been adorned with strings of ostrich-eggshell beads and teardrop-shaped carnelian beads. In tomb SH13, there was a faience pendant

(SH5.T.13/31/06) with the throne name of Nefer-ka-Re (1st–3rd century AD, according to Gabor Lassányi, pers. comm.) [*Fig. 4*], as well as a ring-like object of iron and copper, and a string of tubular faience beads.

Tomb 14 is one of the smallest in the cemetery and the only one that was found almost intact. The slight disarticulation of the skeleton of a woman, who died before her thirtieth birthday, is probably due to natural causes. Her adornment included a necklace of rock-crystal beads, two copper earrings and some ostrich-eggshell beads. Close to the head, an undecorated jar and a black-ware ampulla were found [*Fig. 3*]. The latter, the artistic workmanship of which is remarkable, was found half full of a powdered balsam-like substance still dispersing a pleasant fragrance. Glass parallels for the unguentaria are known



*Fig. 2. Plan of the SH5 cemetery (Mapping R. Lopaciuk)*

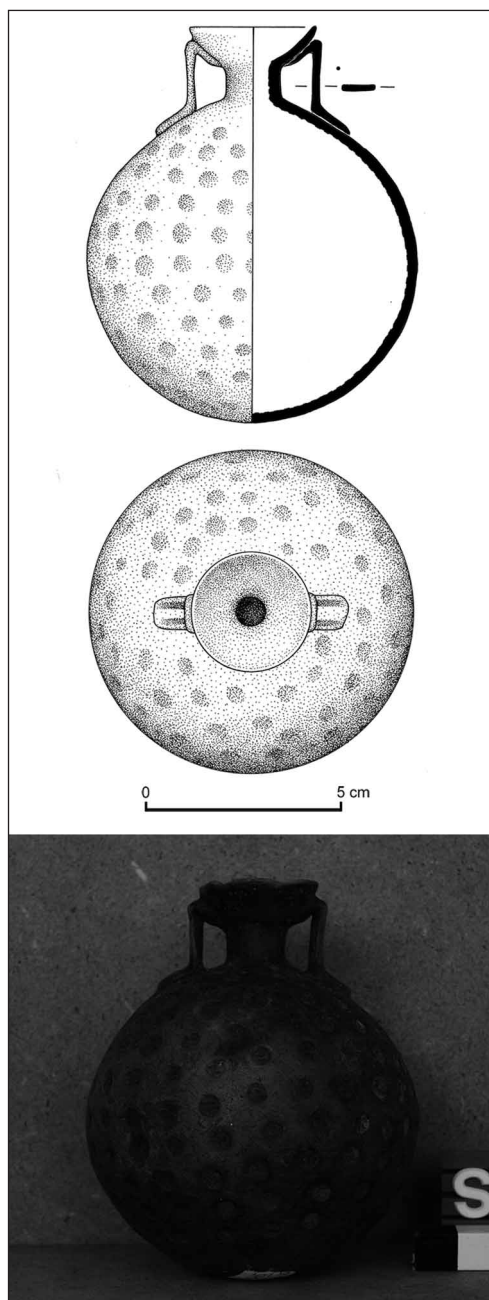


Fig. 3. *Black-ware unguentarium from T14*  
(Drawing and photo A. Płaskowska;  
inking M. Momot)

from Meroitic graves in Karanog (Woolley and Randall-Maciver 1910: 72 and Pl. 38) and Saï (Geus 1995: 88, Fig. 8; cf. also Edwards 1995: 45–46, Fig. 7,F), as well as at Kadada (assemblage of 37 objects, cf. Lenoble 1998: 127–133, Figs 1, 3). The Shemkhiya example should be considered a local imitation either of glass bottles or of late Roman black-ware unguentaria known from Egyptian sites, such as Tell Atrib. The peculiar pattern of circular hollowings on the body is quite rare in Meroitic ceramics. A good analogy is provided by a bowl from Grave 550 at the ‘Romano-Nubian’ cemetery of Karanog (Woolley, Randall-MacIver 1910: 272, no. 8662, Pl. 87).

Tomb 17 contained a skeleton that was identified as a female, but could have also belonged to a youthful (in the early twenties) male, considering the presence of an archer’s ring among the grave goods [cf. Fig. 4]. The skull demonstrated traces of a healed fracture caused by a blow with a blunt weapon, similarly as the skull of a male in his forties buried in Tomb 10 (which was among the biggest of the tumuli in this cemetery).

Tomb 18 also belongs to the bigger tumuli and together with the tiny Tomb 20 it is the closest neighbor of Tomb 19 which is absolutely the biggest sepulcher in the cemetery. The skeleton in the burial chamber appears to have been undisturbed, even though all the grave goods seem to have been stripped by plunderers. It belonged to a woman aged 45–55 and was very well preserved owing not to intentional mummification, but to natural causes. The left fibula demonstrated a healed fracture of considerable severity. The funeral clothes included a kind of cape, a kilt-like skirt and sewn boots with hard sole, everything made of leather. Ornaments included strings of beads of all kinds of materials (mostly ostrich eggshell) [cf. Fig. 4], a bronze ring

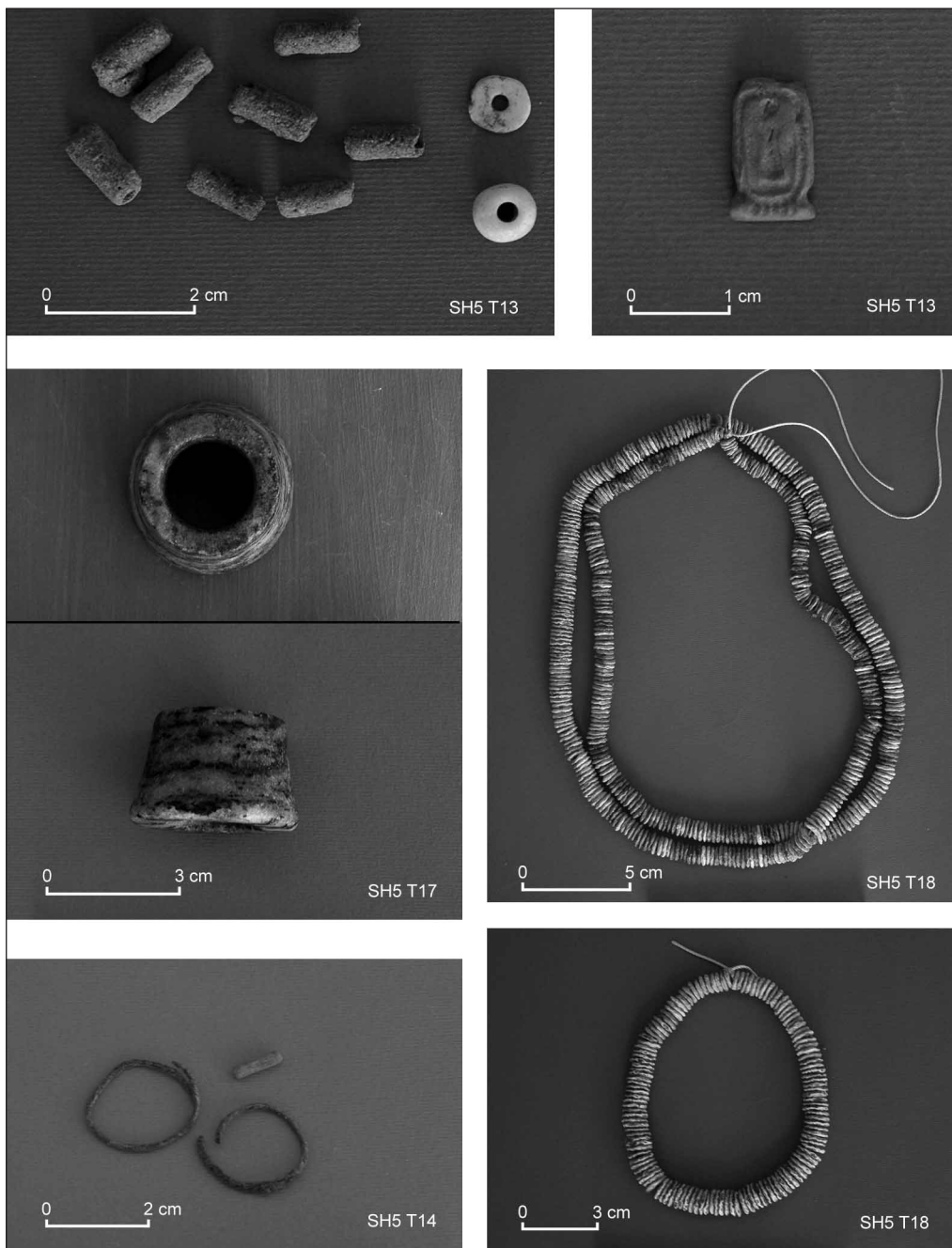


Fig. 4. Grave goods (clockwise from top left): beads and faience pendant from Tomb 13; strings of ostrich eggshell beads from Tomb 18; two copper-alloy earrings from Tomb 14; archer's ring from Tomb 17 (Photo A. Płaskowska)

on the woman's left-hand forefinger and a bead bracelet on the wrist. The fingernails were colored with henna.

Upon analysis of the archaeological data, it can be said that the site was clearly a transitional one with both Meroitic and post-Meroitic features represented. Shemkhiya was no doubt a corridor for various ethnic groups streaming into the Fourth Cataract region and downriver. It

was also a region of economic promise with grazing grounds around the El-Ar rock and extensive *seluka* cultivation on the river banks. These are probably the main reasons for the dense pattern of settlement in the region during the post-Meroitic period and thereafter. A discussion of ethnic composition on the Middle Nile and chronological issues involved has been presented in Żurawski 2008a.

## EL-AR SURVEY AND TESTING

Two trial pits excavated in the fortress in December 2006 provided a typical assemblage of Early to Classic Christian potsherds. The plan was revised, adding a bastion partly excavated in a trench by the south wall of the fortress. The layout as it now looks resembles more closely the forts upriver, especially those on the right bank

south from Abu Hamed (Khider Adam Eisa 1995: 53–58, Figs 1–2).

One of the reasons for continued excavation at El-Ar was a puzzling question of Fourth Cataract fortress chronology. In the light of the Transitional to Early Christian <sup>14</sup>C dates obtained from Sueigat, the issue is of topmost importance.

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