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## Early Makuria Research Project : El-Zuma Excavations : Preliminary Report on the Second Season, 2007

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# EARLY MAKURIA RESEARCH PROJECT. EL-ZUMA EXCAVATIONS

## PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE SECOND SEASON, 2007

Mahmoud El-Tayeb

*The Early Makuria Research Project is a comprehensive program created to study a significant period in Nubian history — a period of transformation, cultural changes and social evolution that has long gone unrecognized by archaeologists and researchers alike. The study was conceived primarily to examine the archaeological remains of the period in question (4th–7th century AD) originating from the area between the Third and Fourth Nile Cataracts. Prior to the inception of this program, few and limited works had been conducted on just a handful of sites in the region, e.g. Tanqasi (Shinnie 1953), Tabo (Jacquet-Gordon, Bonnet 1971–1972), Gebel Ghaddar, Hammur-Abbasiya (El-Tayeb 1994; 2003), Kassinger Bahri (Paner 1998: 115–132), and Gebel Kulgeili (Abdel Rahman, Kabashy 1999).*

*Three seasons of fieldwork have been carried out to date, beginning with a test excavation at El-Zuma at the onset of 2005 (El-Tayeb 2007) and followed by investigations at Merowe Sheriq (Merowe East) and the tumuli field at Tanqasi in January–February 2006, conducted by W. Godlewski (Godlewski 2008), and the present season, the third in the project and the second in El-Zuma, in January–February 2007, devoted to further investigation of the cemetery there (see also El-Tayeb 2010).<sup>1</sup>*

1 The mission was headed by Dr. Mahmoud El-Tayeb, co-director of the Early Makuria Research Project. The team comprised Anna Błaszczuk, archaeologist; Edyta Klimaszewska-Drabot, archaeologist/ceramologist; Kazimierz Kotlewski, archaeologist/photographer; Małgorzata Wybieralska, archaeologist; Karol Ochnio, student of archaeology, University of Warsaw. The NCAM was represented by inspectors Sami Mohamed El-Amin and Neamat Mohamed Hassan.

All field and small-finds photography was done by K. Kotlewski. The field documentation was drawn collectively by all the team members. E. Klimaszewska-Drabot, A. Błaszczuk and M. Wybieralska were responsible for the pottery and small finds documentation and the field register, A. Błaszczuk drew all the metal objects.

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In the first season at El-Zuma, the burials were classified into three categories, by the superstructure, assuming that each category had a different type of substructure. Consequently, the conical mounds, which are the largest in the field, were designated as Type I, while the medium-sized mounds with flat tops were attributed to Type II and the smallest flat mounds to Type III (Obłuski 2007). One tumulus from each type was excavated to verify this typology and the results regarding burial classification and dating were considered satisfactory (El-Tayeb 2007). Nonetheless, more investigations were envisioned in an effort to gain more extensive data on the burial customs in this specific cemetery.

In the second season at El-Zuma five more tumuli were explored, one each from Type I and II, T.5 and T.25 respectively, and three representing the smallest group, Type III [Fig. 2].

#### TUMULUS 5

Tumulus 5 lies slightly east of the central part of the tumuli field and it belongs to the group of eight largest mounds in the cemetery. Its maximum diameter is about 26 m and the preserved height is 3.20 m; it could have originally reached 6 m in height [Fig. 1]. At the time of excavation most of the summit of the tumulus had already been removed, leaving an almost flat top disturbed by some irregular pits. The easiest



Fig. 1. *Tumulus 5, view from the south*  
(Photo K. Kotlewski)

and most effective way of exploring a mound in this state is to position a rectangular or square test pit centrally on the top of the mound, provided that the excavator is aware

of the whereabouts of the shaft. In this case, a pit measuring 10 x 10 m was dug to a depth of about 1 m, thereafter diminished to 10 x 8 m and ultimately to 8 x 6 m (the longer

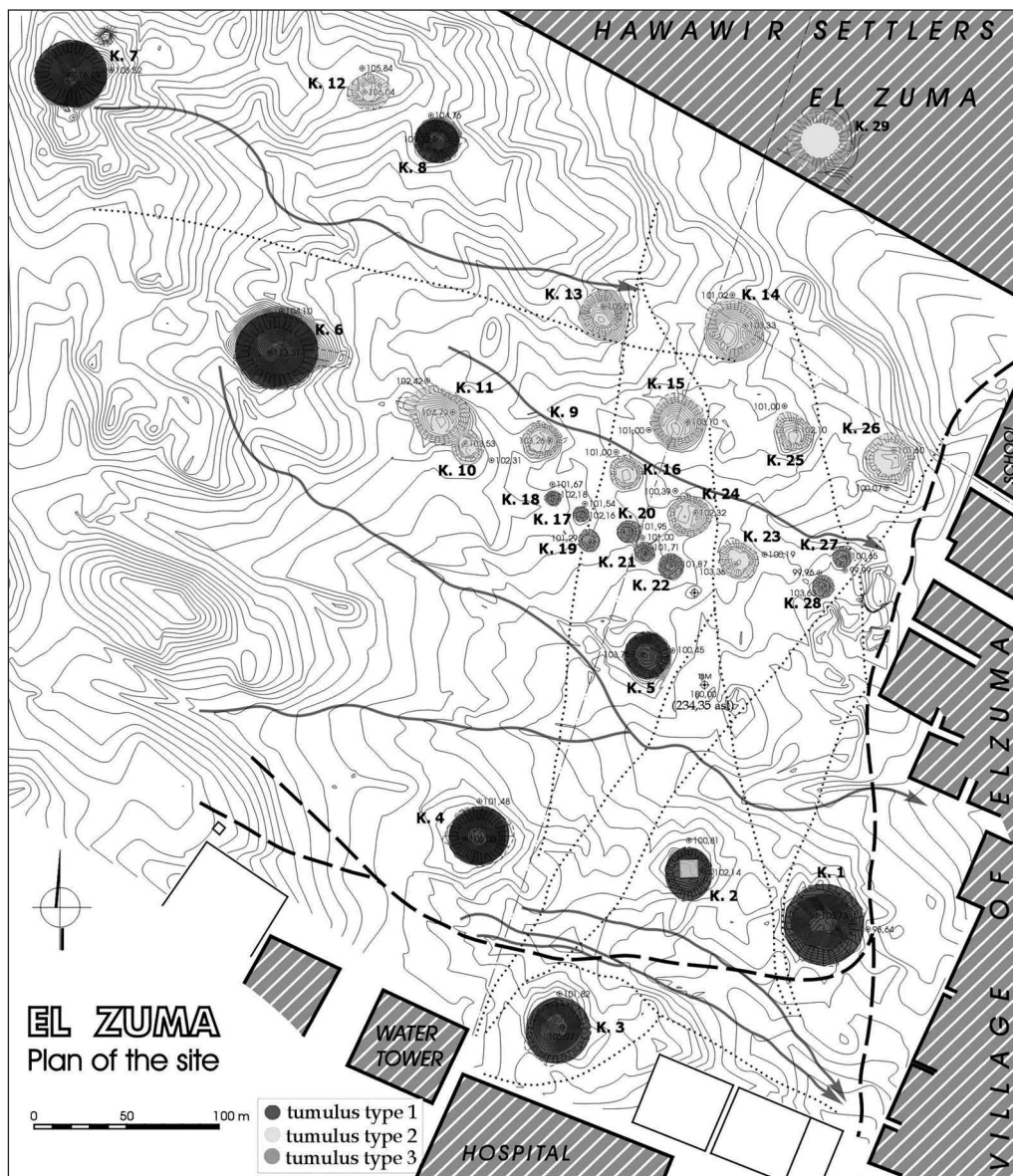


Fig. 2. Topographical map of the cemetery  
(Drawing Yassin Mohamed Saeed, modified by W. Malkowski)



sides oriented E–W). The top of an almost square shaft appeared under a layer of crushed white sandstone that comprised also the upper part of the fill. The shaft measured 3.80–3.70 x 3.65 m. Unlike other burials from the region, it was filled completely with rough stones of different size. Some 40 cm below the soft surface deposit the sandstone layer representing the second geological strata in this part of the tumuli field was worked into a kind of pier abutting the eastern wall. It imparted onto the shaft a U-shape with unequal sides, 2.14 cm long on the north and 3.30 cm on the opposite one.

The burial contained three lateral niches hewn into the south, west and north walls of the shaft. All the three chambers were blocked with the same kind of stones and stone slabs that filled the shaft. All the sealing structures were found intact, promising undisturbed burials unless penetration had taken place from elsewhere. Unfortunately, the burial was indeed plundered from outside, through a tunnel penetrating into the southern chamber from the south. Following regional burial traditions the southern chamber (Ch.1) contained the corpse, while the other two (Ch.2 and Ch.3) held the grave offerings [Fig. 3].

Chamber 1 was entered by the robbers through a round hole of about 1 m in diameter, dug into the rear end of the chamber on the east. The chamber had been plundered thoroughly except for some long bones from a human skeleton, a few pots-herds and remains of wood suggestive of a bier.

Chamber 2, which opens off the west side of the shaft, is separated from Chamber 1 by a low partition wall cut in the same sandstone formation as the whole tomb. A space of about 0.50–0.60 m was left between the roof and the top of this partition, just enough to access Chamber 2 for the purpose of plundering it, too. Only one very large “beer jar” — 75 cm high,

60 cm in diameter — and a small broken cup were left behind.

Chamber 3, the northern one, is separated from Ch.2 by another low partition wall leaving enough space below the roof to enter it. It appeared undisturbed, but turned out to be completely devoid of grave goods apart from some remains of oxidised organic material, probably some basketry which also left strong brown traces on the floor of the chamber. It is assumed that the chamber, which indeed had not been penetrated, held grave offerings, mainly food, set out in traditional baskets and plates plaited from plant fibres (Sudanese Arabic: *sabat/guffa* and *tabaq*). The food must have attracted white ants and rats (one naturally mummified rat was found in the shaft, among the stones in the fill). Nothing but faint traces of these vessels could be discerned on the chamber floor.

The tunnel in Tumulus 5 measured 7.30 m in length and 1.28 m in width, and was 1.50 m high. An external shaft of rectangular section had been cut at the south edge of the burial mound and sealed originally with stones similar to those in the main shaft. They were, however, in great disorder, indicating secondary penetration. It seems that the entrance was left open to be filled with sand and earth from the top of the mound. Careful examination of this tunnel structure leaves little doubt that it was part of the original tomb layout. The robbers took advantage of it, but its original purpose and function remain obscure.

#### TUMULUS 25

The medium-sized Tumulus 25 lies at the northeastern limits of the burial field. It is a relatively low, flat-topped mound of about 21.50 m in diameter with the preserved height not exceeding 1 m. The body of the mound consists of earth mixed with gravel. A recognizable depression on the top of the

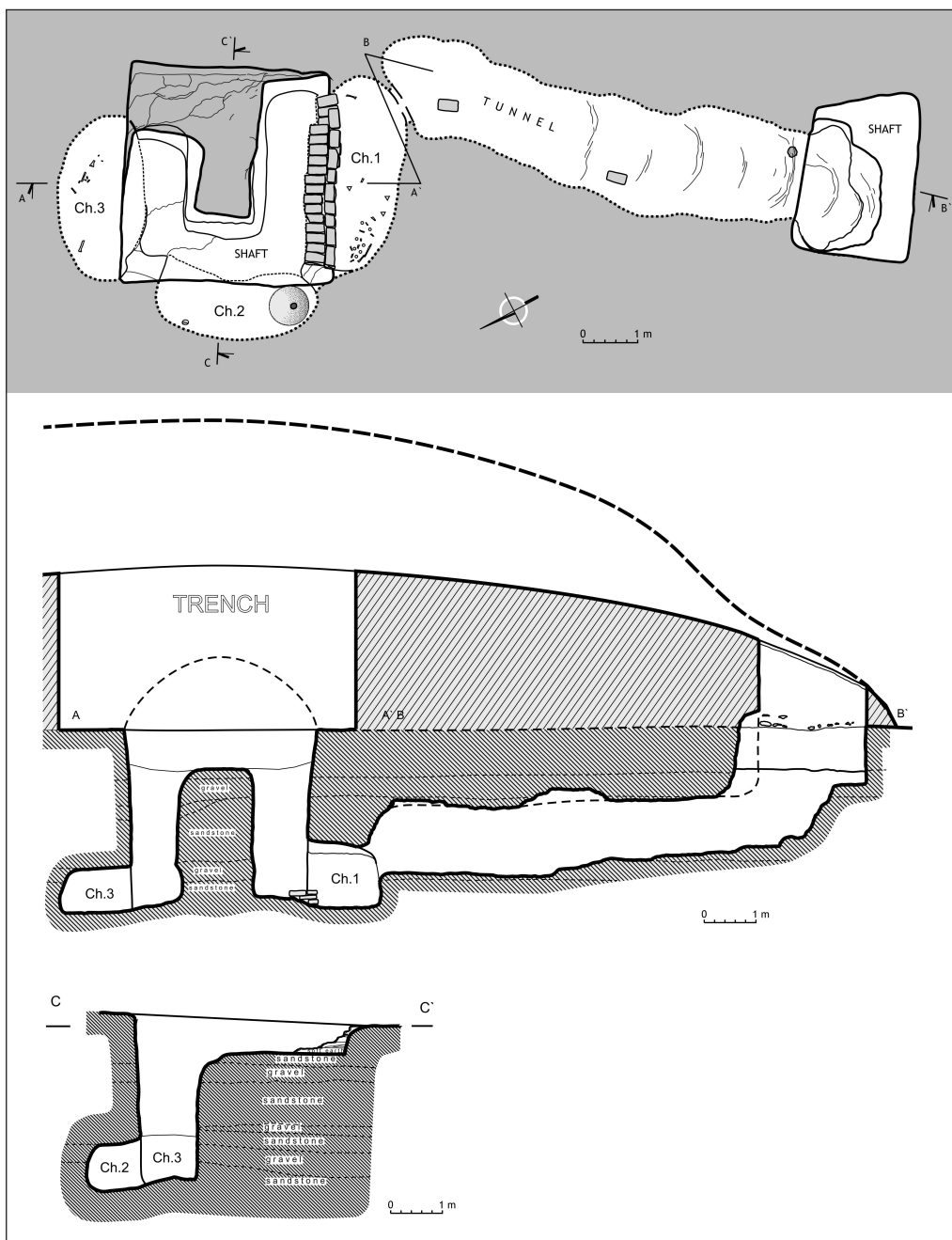


Fig. 3. Tumulus 5, ground plan and cross-sections through shaft, lateral niches and tunnel to external shaft (Drawing A. Blaszczyk, E. Klimaszewska-Drabot, K. Kotlewski, K. Ochnio, M. Wybieralska and Sami M. El-Amin; digitizing M. Puzkarski)

mound is proof of plundering. The burial shaft resembles that of the other tumulus (T.5), but the U-shaped plan with equal sides was cut into solid ground. At the top, the shaft measured 4.34 by 3.08 m, at the bottom, about 4.28 by 3.08 m, the maximum depth being about 2.38 m on the northern side and 2.50 m on the southern one [Fig. 4].

At the bottom of the shaft there were three niches hewn into the south and west walls. Chamber 1, cut into the south wall, measures 2.40 x 1.20 x 0.69 m. The other chambers, 2 and 3, were cut side by side with

an arch-like opening in between. The former was 2.35 x 0.74 x 0.67 m, the latter 2.32 x 1.04 x 0.67 m. The three chambers were sealed with walls of large mud-bricks (44 x 22 x 13 cm), each measuring 0.60–0.70 m in width. That of Chambers 2 and 3 was found intact, but the wall blocking the entrance to Chamber 1 appeared to have been disturbed directly above the east end and partly repaired at a later time. It is worth noting that rare instances of chamber blockages being repaired after plundering were observed in the Fourth Cataract region (in the Gdańsk Archaeological Museum

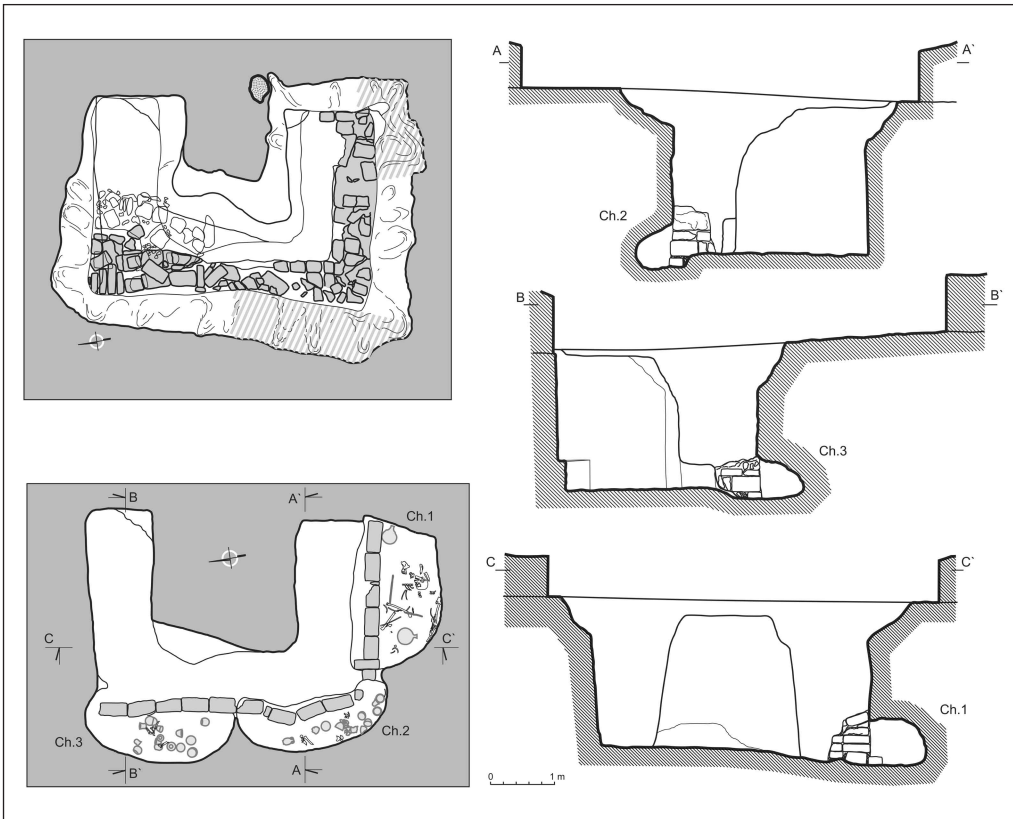
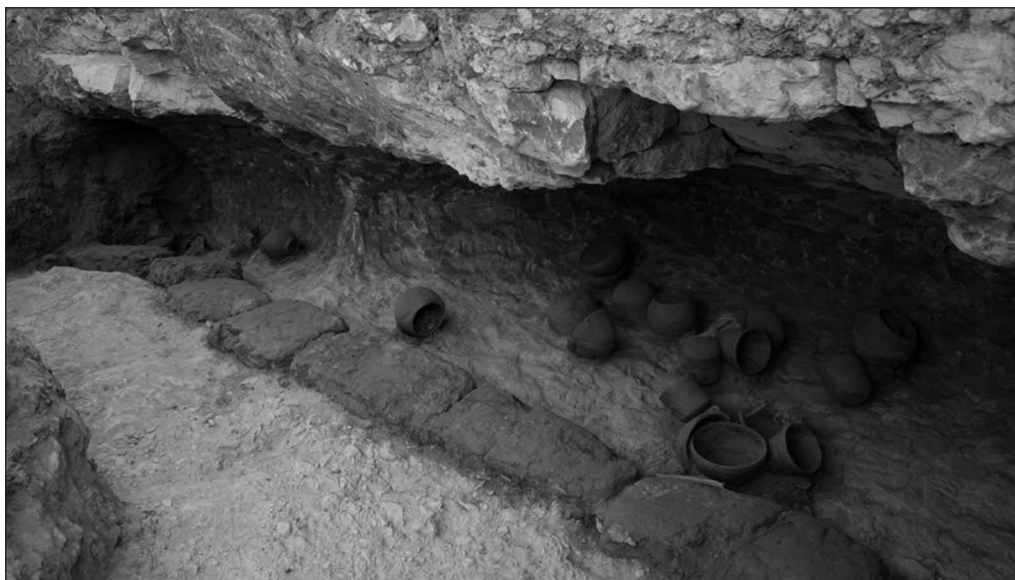


Fig. 4. Tumulus 25, ground plan of the shaft, top view (top left) and section at ground level (bottom left); vertical cross-sections through the shaft and lateral chambers (Drawing A. Błaszczyk, E. Klimaszewska-Drabot, M. Wybieralska; digitizing M. Puzkarski)



*Fig. 5. Tumulus 25. View of Chamber 1, facing north  
(Photo K. Kotlewski)*



*Fig. 6. Tumulus 25. View of Chambers 2 and 3, facing east  
(Photo K. Kotlewski)*



Expedition's concession area on the right bank of the Nile).

Exploration of the burial chamber revealed only some disarticulated human bones and the skull of an adult. Finds included two medium-sized beer jars, a broken cup, an iron arrow-head and a few beads [Fig. 5].

Chambers 2 and 3 held grave offerings. The first one (Ch.2) contained some animal bones, deposited in the center and at the southern end of the chamber. Eleven pottery vessels were noted here: three handmade bowls found broken and eight intact wheel-made bowls. In the center of Chamber 3 there was a pile of animal long bones and 16 pottery vessels [Fig. 6]. Eleven of these — six bowls and five cups — were wheel-made. The other five were handmade globular beer jars.

Traces of a fire containing small lumps of charcoal were observed on the top of the pier close to its southeastern end. The remains were found buried beneath an undisturbed part of the original superstructure, so the fire could well have been part of a funeral ceremony, although there can be no certainty in this respect. Fire traces have been observed near the edges of burial shafts from the same, post-Meroitic period at the El-Kadada cemetery in central Sudan.

#### TUMULI OF TYPE III:

##### T.18, T.19 AND T.10

The third type of El-Zuma burials is represented by three tumuli, two of which, T.18 and T.19, are located in the central part of the cemetery, while T.10 lies closer to the west side of the cemetery field. Tumulus 18 is a very low, flat-topped mound of a diameter



Fig. 7. Tumulus 18. View of the shaft from the west  
(Photo K. Kotlewski)

not exceeding 9.50–10.00 m and a height currently no more than 0.35 m. Robbers broke in apparently through an irregular hole measuring 2.60 by 2.30 m, dug in the top of the mound, causing some damage to the upper part of the burial shaft. The shaft seems not to have been the standard rectangular shape, but trapezoid, 1.30 m and 1.20 m on the north and south side

respectively, 1.30 m on the east, but 1.90 m on the west [Fig. 7]. At the bottom, it narrows down to 1.75 x 1.25 x 1.10 x 1.10 m. There is a single side niche, 1.80 x 0.60 x 0.52 m, hewn in the west wall of the shaft, which measures 1.55 m at the deepest. The entrance to the burial chamber was blocked with large chunks of sandstone, which the robbers broke through. Inside the plundered

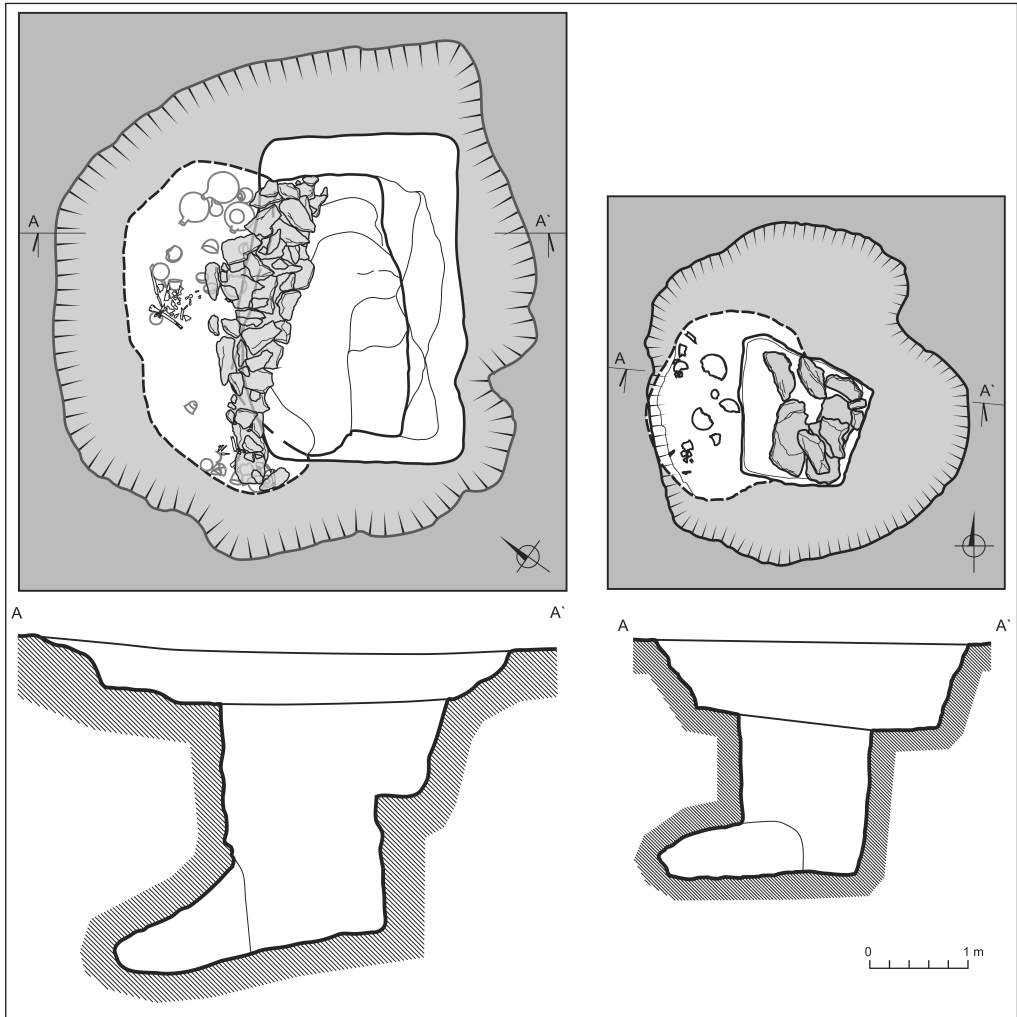


Fig. 8. Tumuli 10 (left) and 19, ground plans and cross-sections (Drawing A. Błaszczuk, K. Ochnio; digitizing M. Puzkarski)

chamber there was a disarticulated human skeleton in disturbed position. The pottery offerings left in the grave included three bottles, one shallow bowl, two wheel-made cups, and two bottles (beer jars), one complete and one fragmentary.

Tumulus 19 also consists of a low gravelly mound with flattened top. Its maximum diameter is 13.40 m and the preserved height does not exceed 0.47 m. The mound is surrounded by a stone ring about 2.00–2.40 m wide. The shaft has a similar trapezoid shape as that in Tumulus 18 (1.34 x 0.98 x 1.37 x 1.02 m on ground level and 1.28 x 0.96 x 1.20 x 0.90 m at the bottom). The maximum depth of the shaft is about 2.34 m. A single burial chamber was cut into the west, longer side of the shaft, and the entrance was blocked with chunks of sandstone. It is relatively small: 1.86 x 0.83 x 0.52 m. The actual burial, which was badly disturbed, appeared to contain a collection of broken vessels which, when re-assembled and restored, produced four complete vessels: two handmade cups, one spouted bowl, one ordinary bowl and a single “beer jar”. The skeletal remains were piled up in the center and northern end of the burial chamber [Fig. 8, right].

Tumulus 10 is larger than the two described above, featuring a diameter of 18.30 m and preserved height of about 1.20 m. The burial had been penetrated by robbers through an irregular pit measuring 4.96 x 3.40 m, dug in the top. This pit appeared to be rectangular in shape, slightly deformed, measuring on top 3.24–3.14 x 2.02–1.99 m and getting narrower towards the bottom (2.80–2.63 x 1.10–0.96 m) [Fig. 8, left].

The burial chamber consists of a single side niche cut into the west wall of the shaft. The large chunks of sandstone used to seal the entrance were scattered about by grave robbers. Some fragments of broken pottery vessels were found in the shaft fill, indicating severe plundering. Nonetheless, the burial chamber still contained 27 complete clay vessels of different forms, in addition to 20 metal items. The pottery collection comprises wheel-made cups, bowls and bottles, as well as handmade beer jars and cooking pots. Iron implements, which were badly corroded, consisted of fragments of a knife, a spear and a number of arrowheads, both complete and fragmentized, single-barb and barbless alike.

## COMMENTS AND CONCLUSION

The present findings confirmed the results of the first season concerning the classification and dating of the cemetery, contributing to the known typology of burials of type III, which are the smallest burials in the cemetery in terms of both the super- and substructure. The rule is a rectangular shaft going down vertically, provided at the bottom with a lateral niche, seldom more than one. Most of the burial chambers discovered so far in the Dongola

Reach were cut in the longer, southern side of shafts oriented E–W, although other locations for the niche were observed at cemetery sites elsewhere. To date, only four burials of type III have been excavated in El-Zuma cemetery and in all of them, the shafts are oriented N–S with a single side niche hewn into the west wall of the shaft. On the other hand, the main burial chamber in tumuli of Types I and II was found cut into the south wall in similarity to the two tombs



*Fig. 9. Sample of the pottery collection and examples of a medium-sized beer jar (T.25.4) (top left) and a locally-made table amphora imitating Egyptian products (T.25.6) (top right) (Photo K. Kotlewski)*



from Hammur-Abbasiya, four at El-Zuma itself and one at Tanqasi. Moreover, two out of four known shafts of Type III burials were excavated on a trapezoid plan, whether intentionally or not remains to be determined. Whatever the case, it undoubtedly resembles a type of burial with shortened descending ramp rather than a rectangular shaft (as a matter of fact, tombs with descending ramps, whether long or short, running east–west and dated to the Meroitic and post-Meroitic periods, are quite common in Central Sudan but rarely found in the Dongola Reach). Could it be that we are dealing here with two separate burial traditions, one a survival from Meroitic times — Type III with trapezoid shaft and burial chamber cut into the west side — and the other an evolutionary development of some kind with super/sub-structures and burial chambers in the south wall (Types I and II)? (An episode which should be taken under consideration during this specific period).

Some general comments on the pottery are essential at this point (for a detailed report, see below, Klimaszewska-Drabot in this volume). Despite extensive plundering, especially of the main chambers of tumuli 5 and 25, the robbers left behind a substantial group of altogether 67 complete vessels of various types and large quantities of broken sherds. The repertoire is a rich one, ranging from large beer jars and cooking pots to small bowls and cups, most of them of wheel-made red ware [Fig. 9, bottom].

The beer jars include small bottles with rounded shape, chiefly with short narrow neck and smoothed external surface, comprising both red and black ware; middle-sized bottles of a very specific type with almost ovoid shape and featuring

a long, narrow neck and low shoulders decorated with two small bosses [Fig. 9, top left, see also vessel Z.25.4, Fig. 3 on 481]; and finally, large globular vessels (diameter 40–50 cm), with medium-long and long neck, external surface plain but smoothed. The beer jar from Chamber 2 in Tumulus 5 is indeed the largest complete handmade vessel of the kind found so far in the Dongola Reach. This perfectly manufactured vessel has a body diameter of 57.3 cm, neck height equal to 21.4 cm, mouth width measuring 10.8 cm and full height about 75 cm. It resembles vessels from Central Sudan (between the Fifth and Sixth Cataracts) more than anything from the Dongola Reach region.

The bowls are again characteristic of the Dongola Reach region between the Third and Fourth Nile cataracts. These are wheel-made products decorated with incised lines or left plain. Three examples with flat rims resemble bowls from El-Kadada in Central Sudan, and a fourth appears to be of northern origin (X-Group type).

A red-ware footed table amphora found in Chamber 2 of Tumulus 25 merits attention, being most probably of local production imitating a type imported from the north. Two examples of such vessels with ovoid body, heavy handles and rough unrefined rim, red-slipped on the outside, were discovered in the previous season in tumuli 2 and 23 [Fig. 9, top right, see also Fig. 4].

The grave goods surviving in the looted tombs comprised also beads, metal implements, spear- and arrowheads. The richness of these offerings, despite instances of plunder, attest beyond all doubt to the high rank of individuals buried in this cemetery.

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