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## Early Makuria Research Project : Season 2007

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# EARLY MAKURIA RESEARCH PROJECT SEASON 2007

Włodzimierz Godlewski, Joanna Kociankowska-Bożek

In 2007, the co-directors of the Early Makuria Research Project divided forces, working on the excavation of the cemetery in Zuma, early Makuria's undoubtedly most important burial ground (see Mahmoud El-Tayeb's

report in this volume), and on the mapping and documentation of the tumuli fields extending north and south of Gebel Ghaddar in the immediate vicinity of Dongola. The second task was carried out by the present

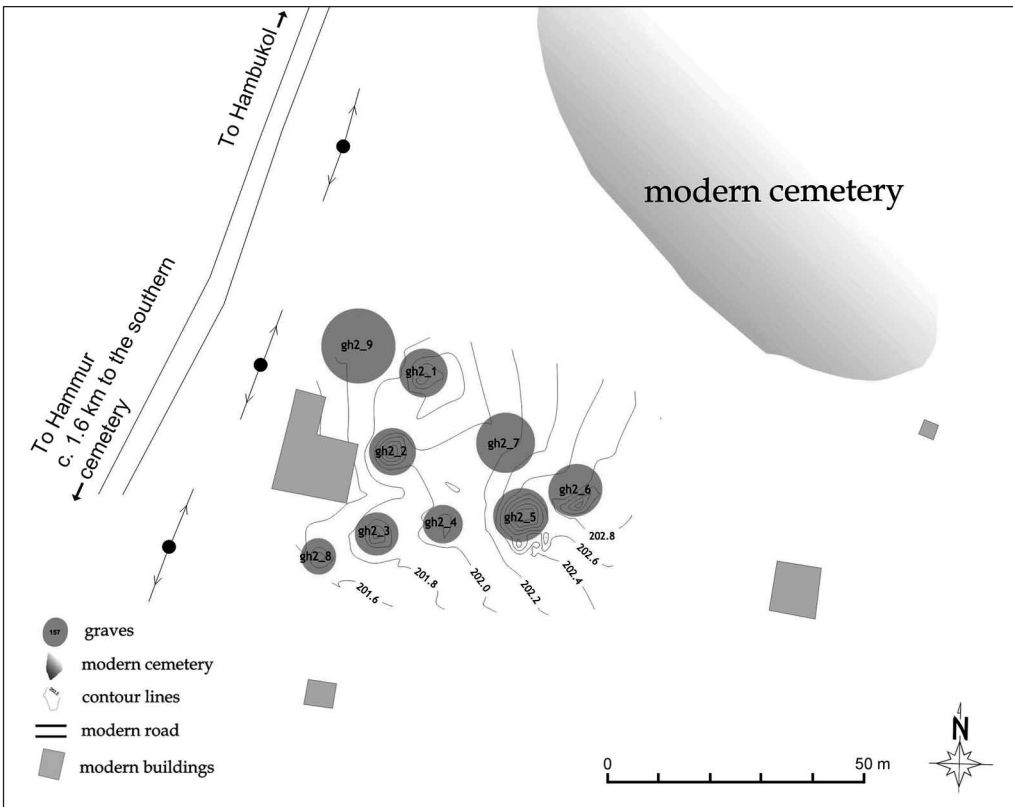


Fig. 1. Survey plan of the northern cemetery (Gh.2)  
(Mapping W. Matkowski)

authors, taking logistic advantage of the Dongola archaeological expedition's digging season on the site (between 20 January and 23 February 2007).

Both tumuli fields had already been identified during a survey conducted by the Royal Ontario Museum and published by Krzysztof Grzymski as sites ROM 4 and ROM 32 (1987: 15–17; 35–46). In 1990, the Sudan Antiquities Service excavated on both sites and the results were published by Mahmoud El-Tayeb (1994: 65–79). Today,

the rapidly encroaching modern architecture of the village of El-Ghaddar on the southeastern edges of the Letti Basin is quickly obliterating the two cemeteries located to the east of the settlement. The present work was one of the last opportunities to study these tombs which may yet contribute to an understanding of why in the late 5th/early 6th century AD the early rulers of the kingdom of Makuria chose to locate their capital city on the citadel in Dongola.

## EL-GHADDAR 2 — NORTHERN CEMETERY

The cemetery to the north of Gebel Ghaddar (Gh.2 = ROM 32) is discussed here as first following a topographical order of presentation. It lies 1.6 km north of the hill and 5.5 km north of the citadel [Figs 1, 2]. In 1990, it was estimated to include about

30 tombs, now the tomb count stands at a mere nine. North of the tumuli there is an extensive Christian and Muslim burial ground. The tumuli are small, round at the top, featuring a coat of relatively small stones. Their base area ranges from 37.5 to 104 m<sup>2</sup>,



Fig. 2. *View of the northern cemetery (Gh.2)*  
(Photo J. Kociankowska-Bożek)

the sole exception being Gh.2.9 with a base surface of 164 m<sup>2</sup>. The highest of the tumuli (Gh.2.5) rose 1.40 m above the ground.

Two of the tombs had already been explored: Gh.2.1 in the northern part by the Royal Ontario Museum expedition in 1985 (Phillips 1987: 35–41, Figs 1–3, Pls 8–9) and Gh.2.9 by the Sudan Antiquities Service in 1990 (El-Tayeb 1994: 73–79). Both were undisturbed and featured rectangular shafts drawn out latitudinally and a semicircular burial chamber on the south side of the shaft with an entrance blocked by a wall of rough stone slabs. The dead were buried in contracted position, on their right side with the head pointing to the east. Tomb Gh 2.1 preserved some grave goods in the form of pottery — three handmade bottles, three wheel-made cups and two also wheel-made bowls — metal items encompassing four arrowheads and one knife, and finally, personal adornments in the form of a silver earring, a bronze loop and faience beads. Phillips dated the tomb to the later post-Meroitic period, rather more likely in the 5th century AD.

The other excavated tumulus, which contained no grave goods, was surrounded by Christian graves with their rectangular mud-brick superstructures laid out in nicely parallel arrangement (El-Tayeb 1994: 74–79; Żurawski, El-Tayeb 1994: 297–317). Of the 55 identified graves 29 have now been

mapped. All follow an E–W alignment and eight of them preserved on their western sides small square boxes of red brick intended for either bowls or lamps. In one of the uncovered graves (no. 33) the body was laid out at the bottom of a shaft going down 1.50 m, resting on its back and with the head pointing to the west. The burial shaft had been sealed with stone slabs from above and covered with sand.

The Christian graves did not disturb the integrity of the tumuli. Such manifest respect for the dead buried in the mounds testifies to a limited chronological differentiation in the cemetery and places it around the time of Makuria's conversion to Christianity in the middle of the 6th century. The cups and bowls from Gh.2.9 appear to be later than the original dating proposed by Grzymski and Phillips. They are near to vessels discovered in the tombs at Zuma (El-Tayeb 2007: 71–85) and Hammur (Phillips, El-Tayeb 2003: 458–462) and can be attributed to the second half of the 5th or early 6th century AD. Lamps and bowls uncovered in the lamp-boxes of the Christian graves around tumulus Gh.2.9 can be dated to the second half of the 6th century (small deep bowls) and the early 7th century (lamps and shallow bowls). Analogous pottery material has been recorded in deposits on the citadel of Dongola.

## EL-GHADDAR 1 — SOUTHERN CEMETERY

The southern burial field located to the southeast of Gebel Ghaddar (Gh.1 = ROM 4) extends for over 800 m measured from north to south and is 3.5 km away from the citadel in Dongola. In 1985, the tumuli count was estimated at 120–150, in 1990 at no less than 200. In 2007, 158 tumuli could still be mapped and

recorded [*Fig. 3*]. The cemetery has been damaged by encroaching architecture; some of the tombs have already been cut by the foundation trenches of modern houses and bricks from the ancient structures are regularly salvaged for modern building. Dirt roads passing through the site have caused additional damages.

The cemetery consists of a much bigger group of tumuli in the north (Gh.1.N), counting 153 tombs, and a smaller group on the south (Gh.1.S). The 13 tombs in the latter group are for the most part among the biggest in this cemetery.

The mounds in the northern group, which is nearer to Gebel Ghaddar, are located very close together amid the new houses and domestic buildings which have sprang up around this cluster. The tops of these mounds are mostly flat, often with slight depressions in the center. They have a stone coat as a rule, composed of dark stones characterized by a rich iron content. Such boulders can be found at the edges of nearby wadis. In many cases this coat has been preserved in residual form, most frequently forming a circle around the tops of the mounds. Wherever more of the coat has been preserved, the stones are scattered over the slopes as well. Occasionally, there are only isolated big stones on top of a mound and it should be assumed in these cases that there was simply no stone coat on the sides.

The southern group is separated from the northern one by a strip of once empty land, now occupied by modern houses. The tombs run more or less on axis, extending southward. Most tumuli have lost their coat. In a few cases, the top of the mound is rounded without the evident flattening that is a feature of mounds in the northern group. Even so, the state of preservation of the tumuli is generally poor.

The size of the tumuli in the southern cemetery (Gh.1) is varied. The most numerous group counts 85 tombs featuring a base area of less than 100 m<sup>2</sup>. Another 70 mounds have a base area which falls in the 100 to 200 m<sup>2</sup> range, the majority (55 tombs) being smaller than 150 m<sup>2</sup>. Only twelve tumuli exceed 200 m<sup>2</sup> in base area. Six of these, including the two biggest ones — Gh.1.S-146 (417 m<sup>2</sup>) and Gh.1.S-156

(514.5 m<sup>2</sup>) — are located in the southern group of the southern cemetery. Only two of the mounds currently exceed 2 m in height and only a small group is over 1 m high.

One of the tombs from the northern group of the southern cemetery, already disturbed by looters, was excavated in 1984 (Żurawski 1987: 41–46, Fig. 4, Pl. 10). A burial chamber once sealed with a wall of mud bricks was found at the bottom of a vertical shaft, opening to the south. The body appears to have been buried in contracted position on its left side with the head pointing to the west. It was laid out on a piece of leather and had been wrapped in a linen shroud. All that remained of the grave goods and furnishings was a set of 200 glass beads and a small handmade cup with engraved decoration under the rim, found at the bottom of the shaft. The tomb is tentatively of Early Makurian date. Investigation of the surroundings of this mound revealed earlier graves situated in this part of the cemetery, provisionally attributed to the Meroitic period based on pottery evidence (Żurawski 1987: 45). These graves were already non-existent when the investigated tumulus was erected. In 2007 it was impossible to locate the position of this mound.

Two other mounds were explored by the Sudanese team in 1990. With a base area of 395 m<sup>2</sup> and height of 2.15 m, Gh.1.N-98 (=Tumulus 1 according to the excavation report, El-Tayeb 1994: 65–68) is among the biggest in this cemetery. At the bottom of a deep rectangular shaft there was a burial chamber opening off to the south. The entrance to it was originally sealed with a wall of dried brick. The grave proved to be plundered. The remaining human bones were mixed with animal ones, the latter presumably belonging to a meat offering made during the funeral. The robbers left behind 11 wheel-made red-ware bowls.

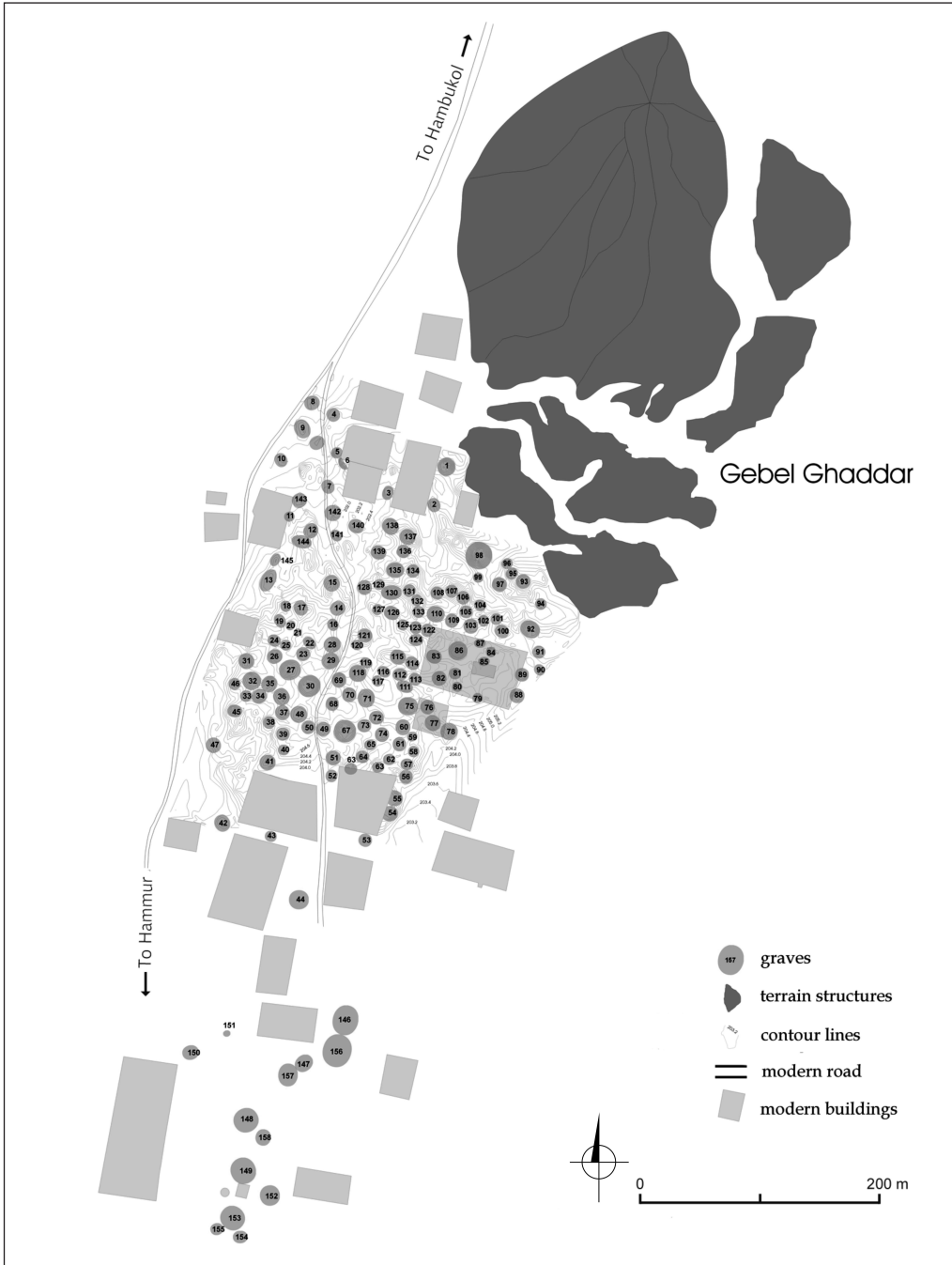


Fig. 3. Survey plan of the southern cemetery (Gh.1)  
(Mapping W. Matkowski)

The other investigated tumulus, Gh.1.N111 (=Tumulus 2) (El-Tayeb 1994: 66–71) was intact. It also had a rectangular shaft and a burial chamber opening off the bottom to the south. The chamber was 1.60 m long, 1.10 m wide and 0.65 m high, and was sealed with a wall of dried brick. The body lay in contracted position with the head pointing south. Grave goods comprised one handmade bowl and the remains of a meat offering from a small animal. On the southern slope of the mound, a handmade bottle and small wheel-made cup were found placed inside an intentionally erected box of small stones.

In 1990, the Sudanese team explored yet a third tumulus, this time located in the southern group of big tombs. Gh.1.S-149 (=Tumulus 3) (El-Tayeb 1994: 71–72) had a base area of 360 m<sup>2</sup> and a height of 1.60 m. It comprised a wide corridor (1.60 m) with an entrance from the east,

running 3.00 m to an oval shaft at its western end. The shaft was 1.00 m deep with a burial chamber excavated off its western side. Stone slabs had sealed it once, but it was found opened and plundered. The skeletal remains in the destroyed chamber were severely disturbed. What remained of the grave goods included many beads and pieces of unidentified iron objects, as well as half of a big red bowl. The surviving archaeological material is insufficient to date the tomb, which is already exceptional in this cemetery because of the architecture of the underground part that is so unlike the other investigated tumuli. Overall, it appears to be earlier than Gh.1.N-98 where the 11 bowls were found. The latter tomb is provisionally dated to the second half of the 5th century based on the evidence of these bowls which are very much like the vessels from the tombs in Zuma in form as well as in the finishing of the rim.

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