

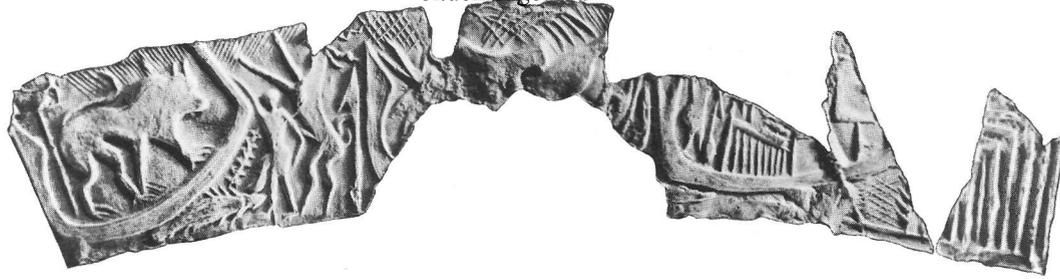
NUBIAN EXPEDITION

Keith C. Seele, Field Director

Time for contemplation is seldom available in the field during an Oriental Institute season of excavation. But matters are scarcely better after the return to the home base, if fifty packing cases of antiquities have to be unpacked, sorted, moved two or three times, prepared for exhibition, and interpreted even in a preliminary manner. Still, if the finding of two thousand objects in the ancient cemeteries of Nubia was an exciting experience, that perhaps excusable emotion was possibly even surpassed while the exhibits were being set up and it was realized what treasures the expedition had brought home. We knew that some of them were good when we lifted them out of the graves. Then, when our devoted volunteers in the Oriental Institute basement, completely devoid of bias or prejudice, took time out from their pot-mending to admire our finds, we really began to warm up to them a second time. They continued to grow on us as the new exhibit took shape. Besides, during that hectic period we kept finding that objects which we had shipped home in pieces not only fitted together but were in some cases astonishingly interrelated. Soon we began to realize that certain of our finds, especially among the A-group objects, were destined to become world famous—attractions to draw scholars to our Museum for years to come.

While these lines cannot serve in any way as a scientific report, we think it right and proper to share with the friends of the Oriental Institute a few of our observations on several of our most important finds and to invite them to visit the Nubian Hall and observe them in their context.

Five years ago, in the initial planning of the program of the Oriental Institute Nubian Expedition, hope was expressed that its results might bring to light new links between Egypt and inner Africa. Perhaps we shall enjoy some realization of this hope, but we little dreamed that we should be fated to turn up fantastic links between second-cataract Nubia and Mesopotamia! Henri Frankfort long ago



proposed that early Egyptian niched brick walls were derived from similar architecture in Mesopotamia. And Helene Kantor has published important observations of the occurrence in prehistoric Egyptian art of a well-known type of Mesopotamian boat with high prow and stern, notably on the earliest Egyptian wall painting from Hierakonpolis (Gerzean period), a copy of which is exhibited in Alcove A of the Egyptian Hall. But it remained for our Nubian expedition to discover a ceremonial palette with deeply incised relief depicting in a single series of scenes three of these Mesopotamian boats, one with hoisted sail, headed apparently toward a shore on which stands a building with niched façade. In the water beneath the rightmost boat is a crocodile (head only preserved), which identifies the river as the Nile (for there are no crocodiles in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers). On the riverbank there is also a goat standing on his hind legs browsing at the vegetation—a motif exceedingly common in early Mesopotamian art though not unknown in later Egyptian representations. The combination might well have been made to order to establish the links between those two oldest civilizations of the world—the Protoliterate period in Mesopotamia, the Gerzean in Egypt—yet we found them on a single shattered object in the plundered grave of an A-group chief or kinglelet in Nubia, nine hundred miles up the Nile. A similar Mesopotamian type of boat occurs as the isolated decoration on a huge storage jar which we found in our second A-group cemetery, a mile to the north of the other. Other jars from its graves contain decoration reminiscent of the entwined snakes well known in early Mesopotamian art as fertility symbols. Some of the graves, including the one in which we discovered the famous palette, produced offering-stands or altars which might almost be mistaken for Mesopotamian examples. Thus, all in all, the links between this area of Nubia and the valley of the Tigris-Euphrates appear to be overwhelmingly demonstrated.

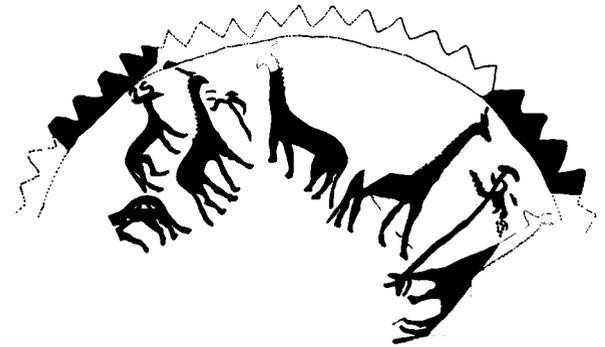
◊ *Relief on ceremonial palette from A-group grave, showing three boats heading toward niched building.*

Another of our A-group graves in the cemetery which produced the palette contained several potsherds, assembled only after we examined them in the basement of the Oriental Institute, depicting in faded red paint two pairs of giraffes facing each other and browsing at the fronds of a date palm. The motif, rare in the Nile Valley but known (with other animals) in Mesopotamia, occurs also on three slate palettes from the Gerzean period of Egypt, about 3200 B.C. We thus have five examples of it, two on our broken bowl, and there is no room for doubt that the grave in which it was found must be assigned to the Gerzean period as well.

Finally, on the reverse of one of the Egyptian palettes with the giraffes, there is a famous relief which has caused the object to be designated as “the palette of the vultures.” The style of these “vultures” is precisely the same as that of three birds of prey represented in red paint on a huge pottery bowl from the largest of our A-group graves, which we have attempted to re-create in the Nubian Hall of the Museum. If our logic is sound, it would appear that this enormous tomb must also date to the Gerzean period, in complete consistency with those adjacent to it in the same cemetery.

Our excitement when reviewing the new Nubian finds and planning their scientific publication is not confined to the important

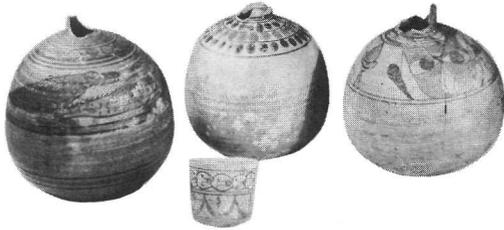
Painting on pottery vessel from A-group grave, depicting two pairs of giraffes browsing at date palm.



Painting on pottery bowl from A-group grave, representing three birds of prey, snakes, etc.



Meroitic painted pottery, including globular bottle with four crocodiles (left), and similar vessel with grotesque human face (right).



Red bowl from C-group grave, incised with three registers of cattle, emphasized by white pigment.



A-group material. The area was occupied fifteen hundred years later by a race of cattle-breeders traditionally designated, owing to our general ignorance of their origin, as the C-group people. We know little about their dwellings or manner of life, but their graves have given to us many examples of their disintegrated leather garments, a considerable amount of jewelry, including shell earrings, ivory and bone bracelets, an ostrich-feather fan, and the like. They were masters of ceramics, however, and outside their stone grave superstructures we found hundreds of pottery bowls and other vessels, most of them perfectly preserved. Most noteworthy are the black incised bowls, no two alike, with designs emphasized by white pigment. Perhaps the finest existing example of this remarkable ware has come to the Oriental Institute and is now exhibited in the Museum. By way of exception, this bowl with its three registers of cattle is red in color and not the typically black type as represented in seventy-five others which we recovered. (An almost identical one, of black ware, was retained by the Cairo Museum.)

Most of the artifacts produced by the people of the ancient world were made of perishable material and have survived either not at all or in deplorable condition. Thus we are inestimably fortunate that their pottery either broken or unbroken is virtually imperishable. Our Nubian exhibit is rich in pottery of all periods. In the brief space

available for our report we wish to call special attention to several extraordinary Meroitic painted examples. We have selected for illustration one group, consisting of three globular bottles and a cup. The bottle with the four crocodiles certainly reflects the dread which this creature always instilled in the Nile-dweller, and he is a truly fearsome animal on our example. The grotesque human face on a second bottle is of deep interest historically, for it was inspired by the face of the Egyptian goddess Hathor, by late Meroitic times virtually forgotten and no longer recognizable. The development of her "decline" can be followed by comparison of this with other painted bottles and sherds in the exhibit.

The Meroitic people of Ballana were undoubtedly carrying on a brisk trade with the outside world. It is probable that much of the glass jewelry, so richly represented in the exhibit, was thus obtained. For the visitor's information it should be stated that we have restrung the beads in the original arrangement wherever we were able to observe it before removal. Another glass object is perhaps the climax of our Meroitic material. This is the lovely glass jar, exhibited like a diamond in its setting at the far end of the Nubian Hall. It was found broken slightly yet intact in a Meroitic grave, a rare and beautiful creation from the time of the Roman occupation of Nubia. A little earlier, Cleopatra would have been willing to set it on her toilet table.

Glass jar, found in Meroitic grave

