

Newsletter of the Society of Africanist Archaeologists in America.

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Michael Bisson, Secretary of SAAAM, reports below on the exciting, enjoyable and well-attended meeting held at Berkeley from May 6th to 8th, 1982. This intercalated Editor will therefore confine his remarks to matters that concern Nyame Akuma directly.

Professor Peter Shinnie, Nyame Akuma's 'onlie begetter' and editor over eleven years and nineteen issues has now passed on his editorial responsibilities. Our membership extended by acclamation a well-deserved tribute to him and to Mrs. Ama Shinnie, who has contributed so much and so generously on the production side. They will be pleased to hear that at a meeting of the Society for Archaeological Sciences, Nyame Akuma was singled out as a model newsletter. We all wish Peter and Ama the very best in what can only in the most administrative of senses be called his 'retirement', and look forward to reading in these pages of the progress of his Daboya project in Northern Ghana.

The future of Nyame Akuma, while not as we go to press yet signed and sealed, also appears assured. Dr. David Lubell has been invited by SAAAM to take over as Editor and has indicated his willingness to serve. He expects to have made the necessary arrangements with the University of Alberta in time to produce No. 21 later this year. (Until further notice, however, all correspondence should continue to be directed to Calgary.) As one of the few archaeologists from the Anglophone world--to which Western Canada if not the Confederation undoubtedly belongs--to have worked extensively in l'Afrique francophone, David is in an excellent position to maintain the continued and essential participation of our French-speaking colleagues. We wish him every success.

Will those readers who subscribe in US dollars please note that Sheryl Miller has now taken over from John Bower the responsibility for collecting (in the intransitive mood) your subscriptions. Her address is to be found inside the front cover. Those who subscribe in £ sterling through Stephen Green should be warned that changes in exchange rates are likely to force an increase in their subscriptions. Indeed it will be hard to escape a general increase, but that, I am glad to say, will be the unpleasant responsibility of the Editor-elect.

Lastly, I should like to thank all those who responded to our request for news. However dedicated the Editor and Editorial Assistants, Nyame Akuma can be nothing without an active and contributing Readership.

Nicholas David

EXCAVATIONS BY THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MISSION OF
THE UNIVERSITY OF GENEVA TO THE SUDAN

Season 1981 - 1982

For several years, the Archaeological Mission of the University of Geneva to the Sudan has continued its work in the ancient town of Kerma. Around the western deffufa, which should now be considered as a temple, have appeared the remains of a group of buildings, indicating the presence of several places of worship and their annexes. This season, the excavation of a series of large rooms constructed using baked bricks has confirmed to us the importance of the religious centre. The existence of these constructions was already known from the work of G.-A. Reisner, who uncovered the structures between 1913 and 1916, but their function was not established and the chronology of the buildings remained uncertain.

In the sector situated to the south-west of the deffufa, we have discovered one of the principal doors of the quarter reserved for the priests. There was an enclosure, formed by the walls of annexes or by a surrounding wall, from which one entered a hall of great dimensions. This was an entrance hall, giving access to various groups of buildings, and also to the deffufa. A close examination has shown that the buildings constructed using baked bricks are more ancient than we previously thought, since at least three phases of construction can be detected. The bricks used for the first stage of these constructions are very regularly baked, and it seems that this was not accidental - that a novel technique for the period was used. A chapel has also been found, and is reasonably well preserved. We have uncovered its principal chamber, which contains the stone foundations of three supporting columns. The floor, made from dried bricks, was covered with a layer of dried mud, and then painted with red ochre. A long corridor was present on the northern side of the chamber, whereas an entrance hall and an annexe were in front of its southern entrance. Other religious buildings were later built on the same site, and we have noted that the baked bricks were often re-used, and that, for the last of the buildings, the walls were faced and filled with small and very irregular fragments of bricks.

This religious group of buildings can be placed between 1750 and 1500 BC, whereas the constructions discovered a little to the south are no doubt part of the first buildings of the town, erected several centuries previously. Around a large depression, some tens of post-holes have been located. They form circular structures, which can be interpreted as huts. A large abundance of potsherds, and the extensive changes to the structures, indicate a long period of occupation.

Our study of the most ancient tombs of the eastern cemetery of Kerma has much progressed. It has been possible, due to the exceptional state of preservation of several tombs, to make some useful observations concerning the anthropological characteristics of the ancient Nubians. In general, the cemetery was developed from the north towards the south, but numerous exceptions can be made. Indeed, we have noted that certain series of tombs are arranged around what was certainly a more important burial. Later, the evolution of the cemetery appears much more complex; and is made more difficult to follow because of the diversity of the funeral customs and the variety of the archaeological material. The four diggings carried out this season have shown us once again the richness of the cultures of Kerma during the third millenium BC.

Some tombs have been uncovered almost intact. In one, a young bowman of 17 years was found, under a large covering made from cattle hide. When we removed the covering, the body appeared in a semi-contracted position, and wrapped in a cloth shroud. The hair-style of the deceased, in the form of long curls wrapped around the skull, is reminiscent of the representation of the Nubians in Egyptian iconography. A pendant of mother-of-pearl was found on the neck, whilst several beads decorated the belt, which supported a loin-cloth of soft leather. Two pairs of sandals completed the clothing. In front of the body, two bows were placed, together with some reed arrows, which had been partially destroyed during a superficial looting of the tomb. A bundle of ostrich feathers was found at the extremity of one of the bows, and might have been a decoration for this bow. The presence of an upturned bowl behind the body indicates without doubt a moment during the funeral ceremony when a meal was shared with the deceased. As in all the tombs excavated this year, the body had been placed on a large blanket, underneath which there was a large mat.

In another tomb, and near to the body, a red-haired dog was found so well-preserved that we were able to distinguish the noose, with its slip knot, which was used to strangle the animal at the moment when its master was placed in the tomb. The vertebrae of the dog were crushed during this operation.

A more ancient tomb was remarkable for its super-structure of black stones, arranged in four concentric circles. White pebbles completed the small tumulus, around which pots had been upturned during the funeral ceremony. At the bottom of a narrow shaft, and underneath a skin, the deceased had been placed on his back, with the legs folded. He wore two wooden earrings and a necklace of faience beads enhanced by an alabaster pendant. Two wooden rings were worn on the index finger. He was wrapped in leather clothing, decorated in two places by a string of beads sewn onto the leather. Near the feet of the body, a small sack was found, containing two flint tools and a bone awl.

To the south of a large tumulus of Middle Kerma (about 1800 - 1750 BC), 500 cattle skulls have been discovered; these animals were probably sacrificed during the burial of an important person. The find has enabled us to study the bones of the cattle of Kerma.

The Nubian culture of Kerma developed over a period of about a millenium. The extensive findings made on the site of Kerma during the two months of excavations this year add to our reconstruction of this culture; a reconstruction which little by little is producing an unsuspected image of the vitality of the Nubian civilisation.

Charles Bonnet