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Edited by
HASSAN HUSSEIN IDRESS

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Archaeological Mission of the University of Geneva to Kerma (Sudan) Report on the 1994-1995 Campaign

Charles Bonnet

The excavation campaign of the Swiss Mission to Kerma took place between 7 December 1994 and 31 January 1995. Gad Abdallah and Saleh Melieh, with the help of Abdelrasek Omer Nuri, directed the excavations and restoration work, which involved almost 150 people, Between 30 and 50 of these were assigned to reconstruction work, making bricks, and building an enclosure wall of 550 metres.

The research focused on the south west, in the secondary settlement, whose limits and organization began to be better understood. A stratigraphic excavation of building I was undertaken and a deposit of jars dating to the end of the Classic Kerma period was surveyed and studied. In the eastern necropolis, 4 kilometres from the ancient town, work on the pre-Kerma settlement revealed an occupation level older than the structures found previously. This super-imposition suggested a stratification of several levels along a fossil branch of the Nile. Eight tombs were excavated in sectors CE 22, which are transitional between Ancient Kerma (2500-2050 BC) and Middle Kerma (2050-1750) The funerary chapel KXI, excavated by G.A. Reisner between 1913 was cleared again, as it had suffered particularly badly during the heavy rains of 1994, and from animal depredations and those of careless visitors, Finally, a new investigation was made of the Napatean cemetery, which was established in the town in about 500 BC.

The pre-Kerma settlement

Forty five circular pits-granaries or storage pits - were studied during this season. One still contained an up turned jar, (Fig. 1) but very little archaeological material was recovered. Several postholes traced the line of a fairly long palisade.

Twenty to 30cm below the cleared surface were traces of an earlier occupation, further confirming the interest of the site. Several postholes, some of which were in rectilinear arrangements, and an oven,

demonstrated that there were occupation layers in situ. There were flint flakes and animal bones on the small surface area that was cleaned.

The south-western settlement

Excavation of chapel E I provided evidence of a long architectural evolution. Even though the earliest levels were not reached, it is clear that the first buildings belong to the Ancient Kerma period. The first was a circular hut, 4.30 metres in diameter, associated with a layer containing animal bones. It was cut by a second hut, which as a result of rebuilding was slightly enlarged (its diameter was between 4 and 4.30 metres). This was followed by a new structure with much larger posts; it was rectangular in plan, with two or perhaps three bays, and its siting respected that of the roundhouses. The next building, which was still made of wood, was also rectangular and fitted almost exactly within the mud brick chapel which succeeded it. This was also enlarged and modified, and had a courtyard beside a colonnade in front of the sanctuary (Fig. 2).

Two very large houses (M 137 and M 138) were found to the north, adding to our knowledge of the topography of the secondary settlement. They were occupied for a long time during the Middle and Classic Kerma periods. Their kitchens were of a good size and were equipped with several large ovens.

As a result of an expansion of the secondary settlement, a road was built at the north-eastern limit of the town over an ancient ditch. In this sector, ashes and reddened earth may have been associated with a workshop (A 142); this latter included several small rooms, sometimes containing hearths. A large square block, with sides of 1.30 metres, had supported a wooden superstructure, perhaps used as a bench. A tiny ingot of gold was found in the spoil.

Further to the south, the rectangular foundation of some sort of tower and the walls of a door indicated the location of a monumental entrance. A rounded ditch forced visitors to pass lower down and a palisade restricted progress close to the fortified walls.

A deposit of jars

Still within the secondary settlement, a depression 25 metres by 17

metres had been dug, very probably at the end of the Classic Kerma period. The depression, which was up to 1.50 metres in depth, had partly destroyed the defensive walls (Fig. 3). Deposited on its slopes and its flooded bottom were more than 200 large jars. They were globular in form with an open neck; the rims and the upper part of the body were usually decorated. Most of the pots bore traces of use or repair and they had been placed upside-down, with their rims driven into the ground. The lower parts and base of the depression were littered with fragments of broken pots. The depression seems to have been deliberately refilled with the soil from nearby mud brick buildings. Later, a well had been dug into the fill, with walls made from fired bricks which seemed to have been made specially for this purpose as they had a rounded profile.

The jars could have been a votive deposit or they may have been associated to a certain festival, like those that were held in villages up to a few decades ago. On these occasions, beer was brought in jars of a very similar type. When empty they were always stored upside-down.

The eastern necropolis

All the tombs in sectors CE 21 and CE 22 had been robbed. However, surface finds of two fragments of an alabaster was bearing the cartouche of Meryra encouraged us to extend the area of excavation in this zone. We found a leather coffin placed beside a corpse and, in another tomb, a pendant consisting of a rock crystal mounted in gold.

Chapel KXI

The reclearing of this building allowed us to make a detailed study of the pointed murals on the internal walls and to plan scenes that were not published by G.A. Reisner. Despite the very mediocre state of preservation, we were happily surprised by the diversity of the scenes representing sailing, fishing with nets, domestic and wild fauna, etc. and by the vivacity of the treatment of an iconography that is more Nubian than Egyptian (Fig. 4).

The architectural analysis also added to our understanding of this monument, notably the discovery of at least three stele more than 4 metres high in front of the entrance (Fig. 5).

The western necropolis

Some more Napatean tombs were excavated in the secondary settlement. They confirmed the contemporaneity of two different modes of inhumation, one in flexed position (Fig. 6) and the other extended within a coffin. Notable was the discovery of beaded nets on the bodies of two women who had been buried in painted sarcophagi.

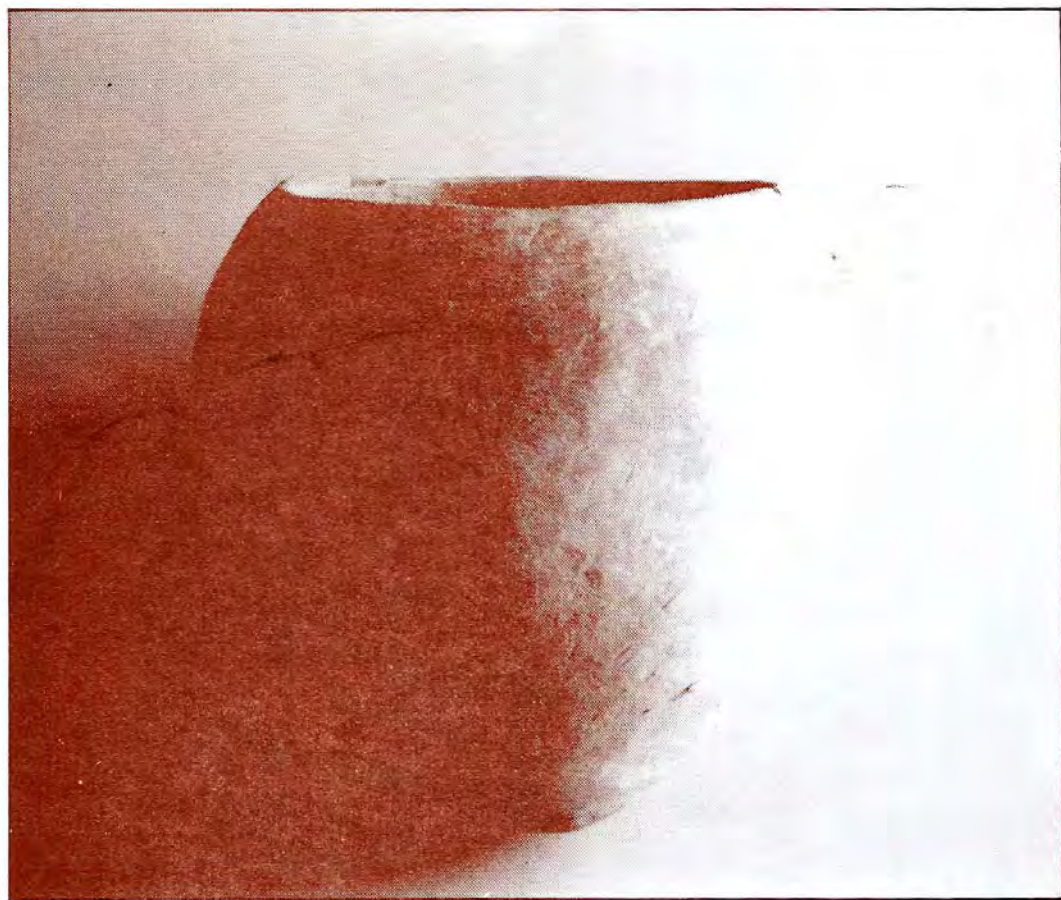


Fig : 1
Kerma . A jore - Kerma jar



Fig : 2
Chapels of the south - western settlement



Fig : 3
The deposit of jars



Fig : 4
The entrance of K X1

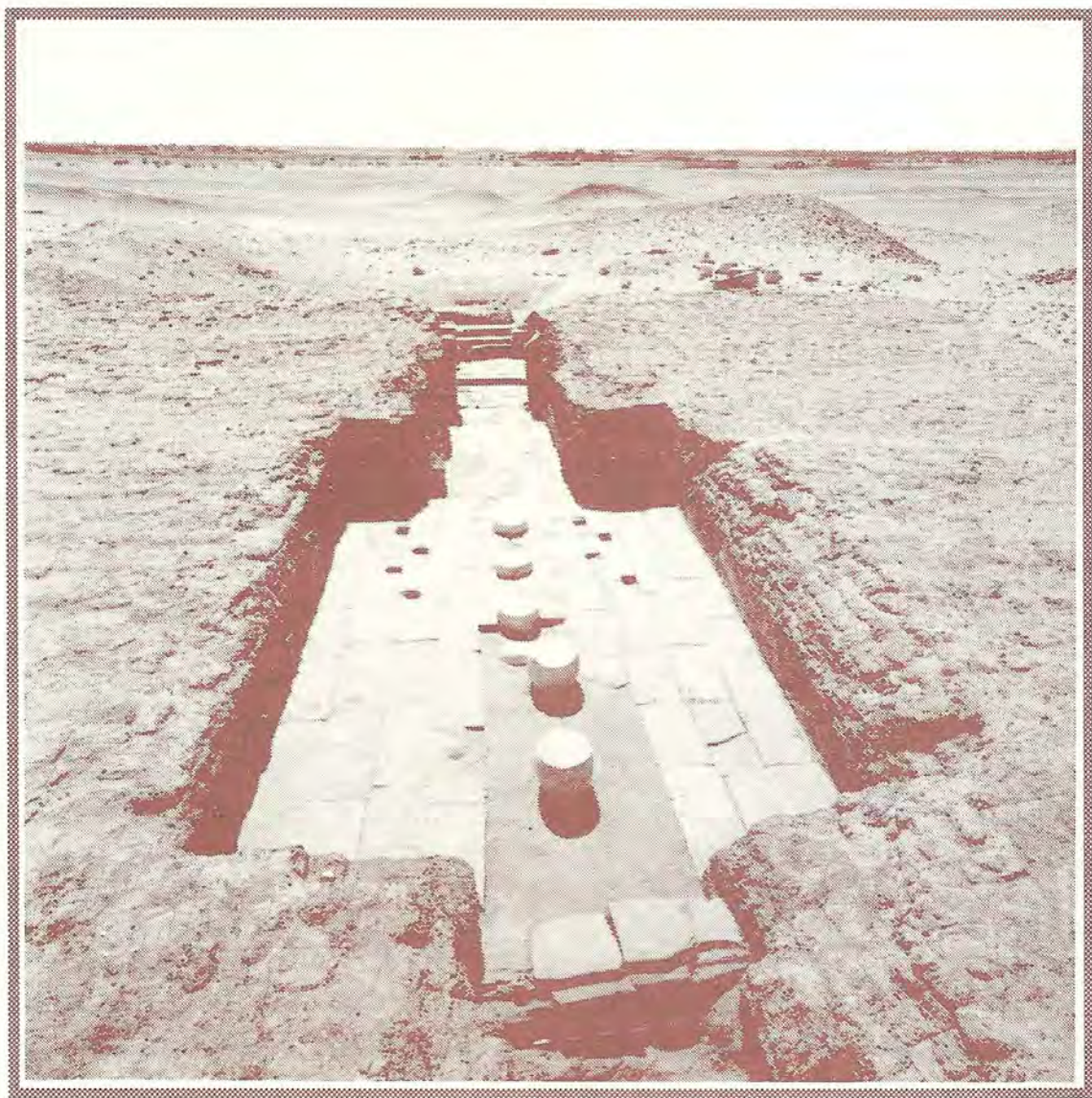


Fig : 5
Chapel K X1



Fig : 6
Anapafon fomb.