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REPORT ON THE MUSAWWARAT POTTERY, 1997

The great density of sherd material from the dump deposits in 224 presented unusual problems for processing and this report can only be of a preliminary nature and further post-excavation analysis will be undertaken during future seasons. The initial quantification of the material recorded some 24,200 sherds in the main dump deposits. While not fully processed and weighed these represent a minimum of 800kg of pottery.

THE COARSEWARES

The bulk of the material comprised coarse wheelmade vessels, most of which appear to be locally made. A new fabric series was devised, but it seems reasonably clear that most of these represent variants of a local fabric, of variable coarseness. It may be noted that these differ markedly from those recorded in the recent SARS excavations at Gabati. A relatively limited range of vessel forms was represented.

An interesting group consisted of small, round bottles with short necks, generally quite uniform in size with a body diameter of c.19cm, necks 7-8cm wide, with a capacity of c. 2 litres. These generally had a burnished orange or red slip. Close parallels for this form are difficult to find but these may be variants of round bottles of a similar size, generally with shorter necks and often highly decorated often found in Lower Nubian contexts.

'Beer jar' sherds probably represented a substantial proportion of the mass of wall sherds in local fabrics. These displayed a very limited range of neck forms, their most distinctive features. The straight vertical forms may be compared with jar Type I.13 found in a number of graves in the Western cemetery at Meroe (Dunham 1963: 345). Decoration was generally limited, restricted to horizontal bands and occasional wavy bands. A few wall sherds of vessels with burnished white slipped surfaces were found, probably from only one or two vessels.

Large quantities of sherds from a range of wide-mouthed jars were recovered. Most commonly with heavy squared rims, many have a distinctive roughly incised wavy-line decoration, framed between parallel grooves around the

upper body. The overall form of these vessels remains unclear, although it seems likely that they had flat bases. All of these appear to represent a type of vessel unique to Musawwarat.

Many vessels show evidence for considerable wear while many sherds were covered with deposits of clay, often coloured red or white which seem likely to represent slip clays used in the pottery workshop. Earlier excavations at Musawwarat have recovered similar vessels (Otto Type XII) mainly in courtyards 224 and 226 and from within the Small Enclosure. Previous attributions of an early Christian date (Otto 1967: 28, fig.19) to these unusual vessels appear unfounded and indeed no comparable vessels have yet been found in any medieval Christian contexts in central Sudan. Large fragments of an offering stand and occasional fragments of the stems of other vessels were identified, representing a type previously found elsewhere on the site, although not published in Otto's corpus. Similar vessels are known from Meroe (Shinnie and Bradley 1980: fig.42, no.135). The larger rims could also derive from the bases of large braziers, well represented in the Meroe cemeteries (Dunham 1963: fig. H 2-11). A range of shallow open vessel forms of local manufacture are also represented. Although the complete form of many vessels is difficult to determine, some may be offering stands/braziers of types well-documented in the Meroe cemeteries (Dunham 1963: fig. H 2-11, fig. I 1-5).

A range of open bowl forms were recorded. These included broad bowls with flat or slightly bevelled rims, often with shallow grooves below the exterior rim. Examples were found in both local and non-local fabrics while a few definite wasters confirm the local production of this type. Sherds of flange-rimmed bowls in a range of sizes were found in small numbers throughout the main deposits. Most appear to be non-local. A group of three complete bowls was also found dumped together. This particular form may have some chronological significance, with such bowls with well-defined broad rims and solid ring bases appearing in the Meroe cemetery sequence (e.g. W.308) around Generation 50-60 (Dunham 1963: fig.107a). They are not found in

later graves at Meroe nor in the late Meroitic Kadada burials. Sherds from such bowls in a white fineware fabric were also found.

Numerous fragments of jar lids, some largely reconstructable were recovered. Generally 10-12cm in diameter it seems very likely that these served as lids or covers for 'beer jars', the mouths of which are usually of this diameter. These may be compared with various types of small vessels found at Meroe (Shinnie and Bradley 1980: fig.28, nos.1-3).

THE FINEWARES

The category defined as finewares includes a range of material which includes both what are considered the most typical fine white or cream Meroitic wares, as well as a range of less distinctive, generally pink fabrics, which were much more abundant. The fabrics of the latter types have much in common with many of the coarser wares and may represent merely the finest in a continuum of fabric types. While showing some variability in fabric the finewares are distinguished by white or cream surfaces, either slipped or unslipped. Exceptionally, a small number of fineware vessels were recovered which had red/orange slips.

Over 2,750 fineware sherds were recovered. In general, these came almost entirely from bowls and cups/goblets, most of which was decorated with painted and/or stamped decoration. Much more rarely, fragments of a number of bottles were also recovered, although a disproportionate number of rim sherds of bottle necks suggests that such vessels may have been more common than this sample suggests. It should be noted that in few cases has it been possible to reconstruct the full profile of vessels, due largely to the problems of reconstructing the lower parts of individual vessels which are rarely decorated. However, the predominance of simple round bases in the sherd material and the rarity of any other forms of bases indicates that most of the vessels had such plain bases.

Some 420 stamped sherds were recovered. As most stamped designs were limited to frieze designs around the upper body, these of course represent only a limited area of individual vessels and while it has been possible to reconstruct many large pieces of several vessels with the addition of unstamped rims and other sherds, it was not practical to identify all the associated plain body sherds. On the basis of the stamped designs, at least 58 individual vessels can be distinguished in this assemblage. However, for nearly half of these, too little was recovered to

allow the reconstruction of the vessel form and/or decoration and in several cases only one or two small sherds with particular stamps were found.

The most common bowls were simple, near hemispherical vessels commonly 13-16cm in diameter, with occasional larger vessels up to 27cm in diameter. These vessels were relatively uniform in their decorative design. Most commonly, one or more rows of stamps were framed between one, or more usually two black bands painted around the exterior. A high proportion, probably as many as 70-80% of the vessels had a red-painted rim. Those with a red rim stripe generally had a further single black band on the interior below the rim. Vessels without the red rim stripe generally lacked an internal black band. In many cases the bands were painted over or beside fine grooves incised into the clay during manufacture and it seems likely that these were made by the potters as part of the design process, to aid with the painting.

A few examples are illustrated on p. 66 – 67.

PAINTED VESSELS

Over 600 painted sherds were recovered. The majority of reconstructed forms again represent small cups and bowls, with occasional larger and a small number of bottles. A small number of open bowls/dishes with internal painted decoration were found, a well-known if relatively uncommon Meroitic vessel type. The finest example was painted with a Hathor? head and Anch design. No vessels were totally reconstructable but large fragments of several were found. All vessels with one exception (red slipped) were white slipped. Most had simple rounded bases. Similar vessels are published from Shablul (Randall MacIver and Woolley 1909: pl.24.6), Faras (Griffith 1924: pl.LI.9) and Meroe (Garstang et al 1911: pl.XLII,1, XLVII; Shinnie and Bradley 1980: fig.50,c) while others were recently found at Gabati.

The majority of the vessels were bowls with external decoration in a wide variety of designs, some of unusual type. Together with these, several designs were repeated, with limited variation, on a number of vessels. Three bowls with a distinctive trefoil design form an interesting and unusual group in the combinations of internal and/or external decoration. Smaller bowls rarely seem to have painted interiors. External friezes of one or two bands of guilloche design were found on both cups and bowls, the design being outlined on a white/cream slip in dark

brown or black paint. Such designs are relatively uncommon in Meroitic contexts although a single sherd from Meroe was illustrated by Garstang (Garstang et al. 1911: pl. xlix). Several small bowls and cups were decorated externally with variations of quite complex vine-leaf designs.

A small group of cups or goblets had distinctive pointed bases although flat and rounded bases were also found. Examples were found with floral, chequer-board and other geometric designs. A unique and very small carinated bowl seems likely to be copying a metal vessel prototype. Only a few wall sherds of fineware bottles were recovered but substantial parts of several fineware bottle necks were also recovered suggesting that they may have been more common than these numbers suggest. One example was painted in black with an elaborate floral motif.

OTHERS

Other material included a very small number (46) of apparently wheelmade black-burnished sherds totalling c.160g, spread through the ash deposits and underlying levels. Generally thin wall sherds, the only reconstructable elements were fragments of a neck and base, both probably from a small bottle or flask. Some 190 sherds of handmade vessels were found, most of a probably local coarse fabric, some roughly decorated with incised and impressed designs. Most, if not all probably come from coarse cooking pots or similar. A limited quantity of sherd material underlying the main dump deposits included a range of distinctive ceramics, very different from those seen in the main ashy dumps. Preliminary work suggests this material is significantly earlier, probably dating to the first century BC.

DISCUSSION

It should be noted that, with the excavation of what is possibly only a small sample of a much larger deposit, whose size has yet to be determined, it would be premature to assume that this material is fully representative of the sherd dumps as a whole. However, even at this stage, a number of important conclusions may be drawn. On present evidence it seems very likely that the material from the main ashy deposits represents pottery dumped over a relatively brief period of time; in archaeological terms it may well be near 'contemporary'. The character of the material combined with the stratigraphic evidence suggests that the pottery was moved and dumped in this area from a previous site(s). This is best seen in the several cases where conjoining

sherds, both of finewares and coarsewares, were recovered from two or more contexts. In several cases, sherds of single vessels being spread through the whole depth of the ash dump.

The kiln waste includes probably all of the finewares as well as a significant proportion of the coarsewares. While the exact location of the pottery kilns remains unknown, the material excavated during this season has already provided valuable information concerning Meroitic pottery manufacture and there is clearly considerable scope for more detailed studies should further excavations be carried out in this area.

A few parallels for individual forms and decorative motifs may be noted here. With regard to the stamped wares, this collection represents probably the most varied and elaborate range of stamped wares so far recovered from any Meroitic site. While few contemporary sites have yet been excavated in central Sudan, the results of previous excavations at Meroe clearly suggest that the variety and elaboration of stamped wares was far greater in this region than in Lower Nubia, where most other material has come from. This seems particularly clear with regard to the material recovered by Shinnie (Shinnie and Bradley 1980: 154-5, figs.53-57), as far as is possible to judge from its rather perfunctory publication.

Many of the painted designs, for example the elaborate vine-leaf designs are not easily paralleled elsewhere, although the general style is of course well-known. This material obviously revives questions concerning the identification of the products of a single workshop, and indeed the products of a single painter. The almost complete lack of any close parallels with vessels from the published Lower Nubian collections certainly highlights the great regional differences and preliminary work on published groups from Lower Nubia, and examination of some examples in museum collections has only served to confirm the impression that the Lower Nubian material is very different, and in the main, of much poorer quality than the Musawwarat material.

The date of the deposits has yet to be confirmed and unfortunately virtually no charcoal was found within the main ash dumps which could be used for C14 dating. Comparison with the published material from the Meroe cemeteries suggests that the main dump deposit forms a relatively consistent group chronologically with most of the more distinctive forms appearing most regularly in graves with the Generation 50-60 range and perhaps more specifically in the Generation 50-55 range. In view of the inexact dates for many of those graves, too much empha-

sis should not be placed on this comparisons, but a date in the later first century AD may be suggested. It is hoped that more detailed analyses may throw further light on this problem.

THE SMALL FINDS

The excavation also produced a small but interesting group of small finds, many of which seem likely to be associated with ceramic workshops in the close vicinity. These include a number of fragments of sandstone grindstones, reused sherds and worked bones, probably used as potter's tools.

The most exciting discovery however, was the recovery of three potter's stamps, two complete and one near complete. The three complete examples are very similar in form and size being simple hand-formed clay cones, pressed to shape. The first two examples had their designs cut into the clay, apparently pre-firing when the clay was leather-hard, the third was simply pressed to a suitable shape. These are the first examples to be found of what are certainly potter's stamps and it seems very likely that they were manufactured by the potters as required and discarded when broken. A small number of crude ceramic stamps and 'rockers' have been found at Meroe (Shinnie and Bradley 1980: 190-91, figs.81, 83-4) which have some similarities to these, but these are generally larger and cruder than the Musawwarat examples and most were originally pierced for suspension. It is possible that these are also potter's tools, but other uses seem more likely.

The unexpected discovery of this pottery production centre certainly requires us to reconsider many of our current perceptions of Meroitic ceramics. The manufacture of high-quality finewares at Musawwarat makes it seem increasingly likely that such manufacture may have taken place at many centres. While the exact location of the kilns has yet to be identified, their presence cannot be doubted and future excavations have the potential to explore in greater detail many aspects of Meroitic ceramic production. Work by Dr. Salah el-Din Mohammed Ahmed at Kerma (1992) excavated elements of a Napatan workshop and kiln but this remains the only well-documented Kushite site of this type. Pottery kilns are purported to have been discovered by Garstang at Meroe although he published no further details concerning them and a small kiln within the settlement at Kedurma, just to the north of Third Cataract (Edwards 1995) remains the only other known production centre, but again has yet to be excavated. •

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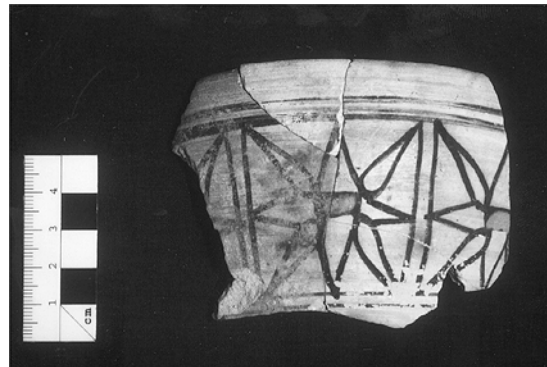


Fig. 1:
Sherds from courtyard 224 with painted design

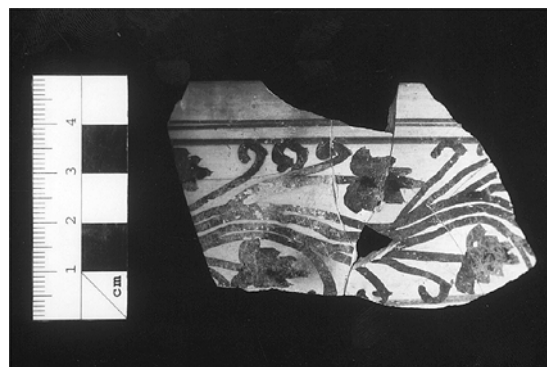


Fig. 2:
Sherds from courtyard 224 with painted design

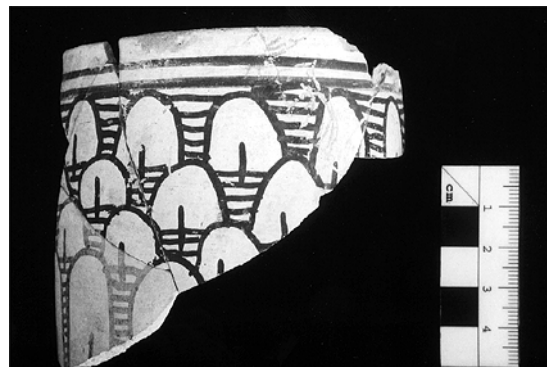


Fig. 3:
Sherds from courtyard 224 with painted design

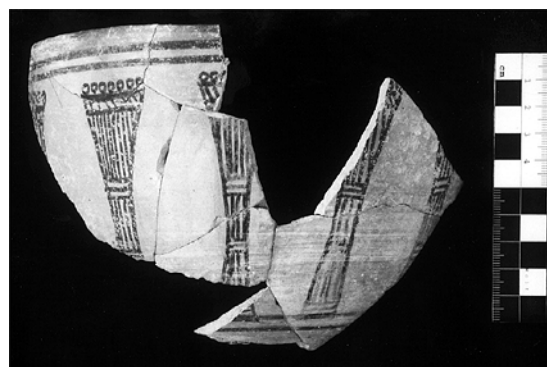


Fig. 4:
Sherds from courtyard 224 with painted design



Fig. 5:
Inner part of a bowl with Hathor (?) design



Fig. 9:
Sherds from courtyard 224 with stamped design



Fig. 6:
Sherds with painted design: crescent and ankh

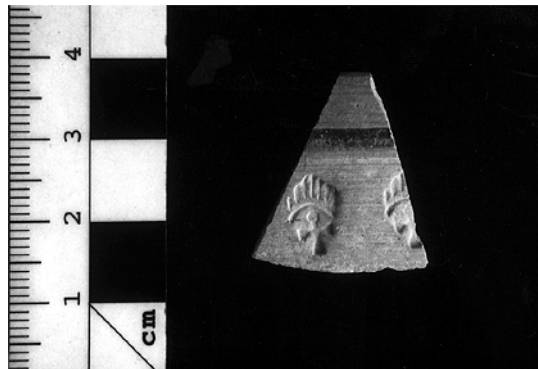


Fig. 10:
Sherd from courtyard 224 with stamped design

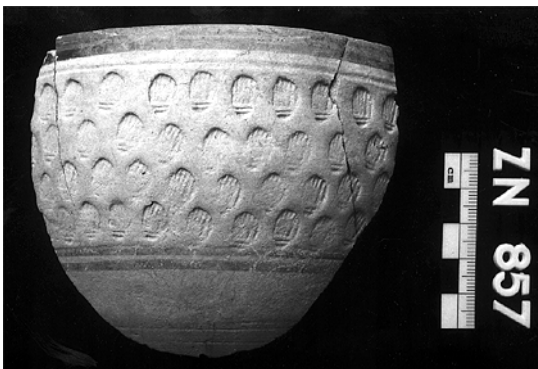


Fig. 7:
Sherds from courtyard 224 with stamped design



Fig. 11:
Clay stamp from courtyard 224, side view



Fig. 8:
Sherds from courtyard 224 with stamped design



Fig. 12:
Clay stamp from courtyard 224, front view