

# Early Meroitic Pottery and the creation of an early imperial culture?

DAVID N. EDWARDS

*This paper discusses aspects of the early history of Meroitic pottery manufacture and evidence suggestive of the existence of specialist workshop production from an early date. A number of issues are discussed concerning the relationship of such early pottery to later developments in the production and use of the better-known wheelmade pottery industries. The novelty of early Meroitic pottery is stressed, as well as its likely importance for studies concerned with the creation of the Meroitic kingdom and its imperial culture.*

‘Meroitic’ pottery has long attracted attention for a wide range of often highly decorated wares, including its high quality finewares. A little of its variety was displayed in *Meroitische Kleinkunst*, a brief work by Steffen Wenig,<sup>1</sup> in which 18 of the 32 illustrated objects were pots, drawn from the exhibits assembled for the Brooklyn Museum ‘Africa in Antiquity’ Exhibition of 1978,<sup>2</sup> the first major international exhibition devoted to ancient Nubia. In this brief contribution to celebrate his long career, I would like to offer some observations on Meroitic ceramic culture, and especially some of the issues which surround its origins and early development.

In 1997 I was fortunate enough to be invited to participate in excavations at Musawwarat es Sufra, under the direction of Steffen Wenig. Following chance finds, made previously within the Musawwarat complex,<sup>3</sup> a most unexpected discovery was made in the form of the remains of a Meroitic pottery workshop, the first ever identified. Along with the recovery of substantial quantities of finely decorated kaolinitic finewares, apparently the remains of manufacturing failures, a significant body of other material relating to pottery manufacturing, including a granite potter’s wheel, was identified. In addition a substantial body of other pottery, much of it thought likely to be locally made, provided valuable new insights into the ceramic culture associated with this very special site.<sup>4</sup>

This fortunate discovery at Musawwarat proved to be very timely when a number of new fieldwork projects were beginning at several other sites in the Meroitic heartlands, providing new insights into the still little-known ‘urban’ culture of the Meroites.

These have in many respects opened up a new chapter in Meroitic archaeological research, and especially so in relation to the study of Meroitic pottery. At at least two (Hamadab, Muweis), the existence of further Meroitic pottery workshops has now been demonstrated.<sup>5</sup> First reports are also now providing new insights into the production and use of pottery at such urban centres.<sup>6</sup> Further finds of Meroitic finewares are adding to our knowledge of the variety of such specialised products. The large sample of material from Musawwarat will hopefully provide a useful benchmark for comparative studies, although perhaps also inviting more questions to be asked about the organisation of such specialist crafts. The peculiar character of the site at Musawwarat, perhaps only occupied on a periodic basis might, for example, suggest that its pottery workshop was not a permanent requirement nor permanently established. This in turn may suggest the existence of more itinerant specialists, and indeed that a single ‘workshop’ might operate at different locations. The high technical skills required to make and successfully fire some of these products – especially the finewares – may also have been acquired by, and restricted to, a quite limited number of potters. From such a perspective it may be productive to further focus on such technical abilities and the ‘technical identities’ of Meroitic potters, following the lead of research in West Africa in recent decades.<sup>7</sup> In that the quantities of fineware sherds found at Musawwarat represent production ‘failures’, most lost during the firing process, we have a useful reminder of the technical challenges facing these potters. That these far outweigh the quantity of ‘successful’ fineware production, which ultimately found its way back into the discarded debris

1 Wenig 1986.

2 Wenig 1978.

3 Seiler 1998.

4 Edwards 1999a.

5 Baud 2008; Wolf/ Nowotnick 2006.

6 e.g. Dittrich 2003, 2010; Wolf et al. 2009.

7 e.g. Gosselain 2000; 2008.

of Musawwarat's occupation,<sup>8</sup> should perhaps not be overlooked. Whether or not a substantial group of finewares was ever successfully manufactured at Musawwarat is perhaps not self-evident.

Notwithstanding the great interest of the discoveries at Musawwarat, the huge range and variety of Meroitic ceramic production as a whole still remains poorly studied. Studies of wheelmade coarsewares, recovered in vast quantities from any urban excavations, remain poorly developed, such tentative relative chronologies as have been constructed<sup>9</sup> still require refinement. Linkages with wider historical narratives and chronologies also remain uncertain. That, for example radiocarbon dates for some of the latest types of Meroitic wheelmade pottery suggest they appeared as early as the first half of the third century AD,<sup>10</sup> may fit poorly with chronologies which would also place them in the latest royal/elite tombs dated a century, or more, later. Their use as cultural markers, maintaining culture-historical models suggested more than a century ago by Garstang's first excavations at Meroe, also remain problematic. As the work of the late Patrice Lenoble<sup>11</sup> made clear, changing ceramic culture, from 'Meroitic' to 'post-Meroitic', needs first to be investigated in terms of the organisation of production, prior to any attempts to link this to wider socio-political transformations in the third-fourth centuries. Interpreting the significance of changing ceramic culture at the end of the Meroitic period requires a prior understanding of exactly how, where and by whom 'Meroitic' pottery was in fact produced?

If the study of the 'end' of Meroitic ceramics presents many challenges, many other similarly fundamental facets of Meroitic ceramic culture remain obscure. Significant components, not least a wide range of 'handmade' pottery types, usually present in most excavated assemblages, still remain very poorly understood. Where handmade pottery appears to be a particular feature of the earlier Meroitic centuries, this lack of knowledge is particularly problematic. In what remain the most fully explored parts of the kingdom, Lower and Middle Nubia, there are very few early Meroitic sites.<sup>12</sup> In the Meroitic heartlands the archaeological record of the early Meroitic period remains very fragmentary, including at Meroe, as little pottery seems to have been deposited in early Meroitic tombs. As such, information relating

to early Meroitic ceramic culture remains limited. Quite fundamental questions remain. To what extent was there a shared ceramic culture within the Meroitic early kingdom? How and where might this be recognized, and how was it organised? Where might it originate? How did it develop into the varied and often highly elaborated Meroitic wheelmade ceramic culture of the later Meroitic centuries?

In a region such as the Middle Nile where ceramic culture has an unusually long history as a highly elaborated and socially valued craft, understanding the origins of 'Meroitic' potting is perhaps a question that deserves more attention than it has yet received. The often distinctive potting traditions of Bronze Age 'Kush/Nubia' seem to have been, at least temporarily, disrupted during the later second millennium BC, one legacy of Egypt's southwards expansion during the New Kingdom. A lack of archaeologically recognizable and distinctive 'indigenous' ceramic culture(s) over subsequent centuries is in itself of interest, a condition, which seems to persist through the first half of the first millennium BC. In turn most of what we encounter in 'Napatan' pottery draws heavily on Egyptian production techniques and repertoires. However, in the Meroitic period these were to change markedly, with the appearance of what are in fact often quite new types of pottery. These may look to both internal (Sudanic) and external (Mediterranean) traditions, in turn relating to a number of distinct modes of production and technologies.

Returning to the more than 24,000 sherds recovered during the 1997 excavations at Musawwarat, a very small but interesting body of handmade sherds (< 150) were encountered, some associated with the workshop dumps, while a few others were found within the courtyard/garden areas then also under excavation. Amongst these one sherd (Fig.1) provides a point of access to a whole range of questions which may be posed concerning this still poorly understood class of Meroitic material culture, its 'handmade' ceramics. A fragment of a bowl with incised and wedge-stamped decoration, this otherwise unusual find at Musawwarat provides a good example of a Meroitic pottery tradition very different from that of the kaolinitic finewares, or indeed the mass of other wheelmade coarsewares found at the site. It does however seem to represent a type of pottery which can be paralleled at a range of sites. Its distinctive chevrons design and decoration can, for example be paralleled at Meroe,<sup>13</sup> in the

8 e.g. Fitzenreiter et al. 1999.

9 e.g. Edwards 1999b.

10 Edwards 1998, 247.

11 Lenoble/ Sharif 1992.

12 Edwards 1995; Williams 1985; 1991.

13 Török 1997, fig. 68, 198.15.

rural cemetery of Gabati<sup>14</sup> and as far north as Qasr Ibrim.<sup>15</sup> Very similar decoration can also be found on other handmade pottery forms, for example at Faras.<sup>16</sup> Here then we have an example of what appears to be a very distinctive handmade pottery, potentially distributed over a very wide area. On the basis of contextual information it seems likely to be of quite early date, dating to the last centuries BC. If, as it would seem very likely, these are the products of a specialised pottery workshop, such products would seem very clearly to represent ‘indigenous’ cultural features, rooted in the cultural idioms of Sudanic Africa.



Figure 1: Sherd of handmade bowl with incised and wedge-stamped decoration from Musawwarat es Sofra [Reg. ZN 819. IA-120.15-331-1,1] (photo D. N. Edwards, 1997)

Such ‘Sudanese-Saharan’ wares, as designated by Williams,<sup>17</sup> also however show considerable variety, with histories as complex and varied as the more familiar wheelmade industries. We are beginning to be able to distinguish a range of handmade wares, some occurring within chronologically quite restricted ranges. Some can already be demonstrated to have quite specific geographical origins, and as such to be the product of specific workshops. As it is also apparent, such wares seem likely to have been produced in a range of different contexts. Notwithstanding generalising assumptions that these commonly represent more ‘domestic’ production, it seems increasingly clear that this is not always the case, and perhaps rarely so. Other easy contrasts with ‘wheelmade’ pottery industries may also appear less clear than previously assumed. A range of different manufacturing techniques are clearly in use including true wheel throwing, as well as the use of slow wheels/‘tournettes’, paddle-and-anvil manuf-

acture and other handforming techniques. Different finishing and decorative techniques can also be identified,<sup>18</sup> which may be potentially significant in differentiating different handmade products. Within both ‘wheelmade’ and ‘handmade’ traditions we encounter huge variations in the technical quality and elaboration of decoration, while vessel forms and decorative repertoires also draw on and interweave both Sudanic and external inspiration.

That, contrary to early presumptions, handmade pottery was not primarily a ‘domestic’, nor indeed necessarily a female craft,<sup>19</sup> may be suggested as a point of departure. Instead, that a huge variety of ‘handmade’ pottery was produced over the more than five centuries of the Meroitic period is very evident. Amongst this, as with wheelmade production, basic distinctions may readily be drawn between coarsewares and finewares, such distinctions also suggest the existence of a number of different forms/modes of production. The former may be linked to individual artisans producing for local consumption, while the latter may well be the work of specialist workshops, for wide distribution. If a part of such pottery might be a ‘domestic’ craft, it seems likely to relate mainly to the manufacture of more domestic utensils. Even if this might be so, however, it may perhaps be dangerous to assume this was necessarily a ubiquitous domestic skill. Where most of our knowledge in fact derives from what must be assumed to be rather atypical ‘urban’ communities, it is perhaps unlikely that such domestic crafts were being widely practised at a household level.

On the contrary, amongst the selections of handmade pottery so far published even these coarser wares suggest a level of standardisation perhaps more suggestive of specialised producers. Amongst the very small quantity of handmade pottery encountered at Musawwarat, it is striking that very similar material (notably small closed jars) can also be found in the collections within the urban community at Hamadab,<sup>20</sup> ca. 60 km to the northeast. Ranging more widely, similarities between material at Hamadab<sup>21</sup> and as far afield as Kidurma near the Third Cataract,<sup>22</sup> may in fact suggest a wide distribution of quite uniform coarse handmade wares, as opposed to the ubiquity of a widely practised domestic craft. Such evidence does however only relate to more ‘urban’ communities. It is quite possible that smaller-scale domestic ceramic production may have

14 Edwards 1998, fig. 6.23 <586/1>.

15 Rose 1996, fig. 4.2, P. 233c, P. 96c.

16 Griffith 1924, Pl. XLIV,1.

17 Williams 1991, 72f.

18 Rose 1998, 165-8.

19 e.g. Adams 1964; 1986; see also Gosselain 2008.

20 Dittrich 2003, Abb. 1.5.

21 Dittrich 2003, Abb. 5.

22 Edwards 2012, pl. 75.

existed amongst more 'rural' populations, but we remain almost entirely uninformed on the character of Meroitic 'domestic' pottery assemblages outside the few 'urban' settlements.

Looking beyond such material more fundamental issues must be confronted when we attempt to envisage the early centuries of 'Meroitic' pottery production, of any kind, and its development during the later centuries of the first millennium BC. Excavations within Meroe city have yet to define a corpus of 'Early Meroitic' pottery. The few excavated graves of this period at Meroe contain little pottery, generally restricted to small quantities of handmade jars and offering stands/braziers. Until recently, our limited knowledge of Ptolemaic pottery has meant that recognizing and distinguishing possible imports from local Meroitic manufactures has been difficult. However, it would seem that wheel-using workshops were in operation during the last centuries BC producing a range of jars and bowls, found alongside some imported pottery. Very similar types, both in form and decoration, can be found at sites as far apart as the Meroe region and Qasr Ibrim in Lower Nubia. The extent that this may represent the development from late Napatan production in the earlier first millennium BC remains to be demonstrated.

By contrast handmade wares occupy a much more dominant place in early Meroitic ceramic assemblages, albeit commonly supplemented by imported Egyptian pottery (at least in more northern areas). What is however perhaps easy to overlook with such material, is the extent to which such handmade pottery in fact represents a thoroughly new (Sudanic) contribution to ceramic repertoires, marking a major change in relation to the earlier Napatan period. While still known from only a few well-published collections, notably from Lower and Middle Nubia, material can now be identified from sites throughout the Meroitic kingdom, for example at Qasr Ibrim, Qustul and Faras in Lower Nubia and Amir Abdallah in Middle Nubia.<sup>23</sup> In the Meroitic heartlands, a substantial body of material was recovered at Gabati<sup>24</sup> with other occasional finds in the Meroitic heartlands as far south as the Khartoum region.<sup>25</sup> Very little has been reported from (the few) Meroitic sites so far investigated in the Dongola Reach, although preliminary reports from the Fourth Cataract region

have recorded a small, if varied body of 'Meroitic' handmade pottery.<sup>26</sup>

These show considerable variety, ranging from coarse domestic wares to often elaborately decorated finewares, often of high technical quality. Distinguishing between the highly varied 'handmade' products encountered in Meroitic contexts presents many challenges. The predominant use of alluvial Nile clays for most Meroitic pottery (both handmade and wheelmade) presents significant problems for archaeological ceramicists aspiring to meaningfully distinguish different products on the basis of fabric. Where systematic attempts have been made to examine and classify fabrics within large pottery collections<sup>27</sup> it is apparent that most Meroitic handmade fabrics are not sufficiently distinctive to identify a specific source/production centre. In the absence of such indicators, determining the extent to which specialist producers may have been supplying the wider population remains difficult. Nonetheless the existence of at least one highly distinctive fabric now recognized in collections across the Meroitic Kingdom would seem to confirm both the existence of specialist producers, and of mechanisms which allowed their wide distribution. Such a possibility was already suggested by archaeologists working in central Sudan during the 1970s and 1980s, encountering handmade pottery 'produced by specialized workshops according to well-defined rules',<sup>28</sup> and indeed acknowledged, if not further explored, by Adams.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, a similar conclusion was drawn following early technical analyses of pottery fabrics from the Khartoum region, noting the relatively homogeneous character of the early Meroitic pottery fabrics they examined.<sup>30</sup>

This particular ware was first adequately described as one of several Early Meroitic handmade wares recovered from the hinterland plateau to the east of Qasr Ibrim.<sup>31</sup> It (Ibrim Ware A4) is readily recognisable macroscopically having a fabric which includes abundant and often large inorganic inclusions, and an (unusual) lack of organic temper. Interior surfaces are generally very compacted but appear to lack evidence for scraping during manufacture, while the often elaborated decoration is made with comb-impressions. In this ware, the often very thin vessel walls and their compactness suggest manufacture with a paddle and anvil technique. Its distinctive

23 Qasr Ibrim: Rose 1996; Qustul: Williams 1991; Faras: Griffith 1924; Amir Abdallah: Fernandez 1983.

24 Rose 1998.

25 Caneva 1988; el-Tayeb/ al-Nabi 1998; Geus/ Lenoble 1982; Lenoble 1994.

26 e.g. el-Tayeb/ Kolosowka 2007; Zurawski 2013, Fig. 2.

27 e.g. Rose 1996; 1998.

28 Geus 1984, 75.

29 Adams 1986, 419.

30 Francaviglia/ Palmieri 1988, 357.

31 Rose 1996, 121, 128f.

composition was also apparent in some experimental chemical and petrographic studies carried out by Laurence Smith and Alan Vince<sup>32</sup> on a range of Meroitic fabrics from central Sudan. Further examples in Lower Nubian contexts of a similar date were also identified by Rose in the publication of the Meroitic cemetery at Gemai (Gammal) excavated in 1915-16.<sup>33</sup> Another example may also be identified with some confidence amongst the large collection of handmade pottery found at Amir Abdallah near Abri. Amongst this large and very important collection of Early Meroitic pottery it is worth noting that it was again found that the pottery fabrics lacked many distinctive features except perhaps in the presence of quite abundant mica, seemingly common to much pottery of many periods manufactured within the regions of Basement Complex between the Second and Third Cataracts, and indeed the Fourth Cataract region. However, amongst this (locally made?) material at Amir Abdallah one large ovoid jar (tomb 4, no.3) with an elaborate and very distinctive decoration (Fig.2) could be singled out on the basis of its very unusual fabric, notable for its lack of organic temper.<sup>34</sup> Further northern examples of this fabric have been identified in surface collections from the Third Cataract region.<sup>35</sup>

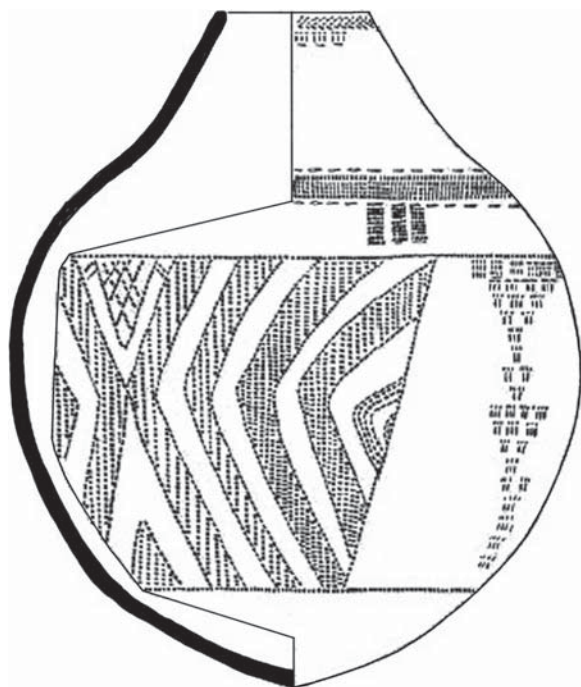


Figure 2: Handmade jar from Amir Abdallah (tomb 4, no.3) (after Fernandez 1983, fig. 24)

With relatively little Meroitic pottery recorded from the Dongola Reach the presence of this fabric between the Third and Fourth Cataracts remains unconfirmed, although Rose draws attention to a potentially similar fabric at Sanam, noted by Griffith, notable for an apparent lack of organic (chaff) inclusions. The significantly earlier date of almost all the material found there<sup>36</sup> might, however, count against such an identification; recent identifications of other quite distinctive fabrics, dominated by inorganic inclusions in the Fourth Cataract region may perhaps suggest more likely parallels.<sup>37</sup> More likely occurrences may be identified in material from Jebel Barkal on the basis of some illustrated sherds.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately, at Meroe it is as yet not possible to identify this fabric within the larger body of handmade pottery. That examples may well exist amongst the 'Domestic Pottery' found there<sup>39</sup> does however seem likely. It is, however, identifiable amongst most other collections from excavations within the Meroitic heartlands in recent years. Small quantities (Fabric G7) were found in the Meroitic cemetery at Gabati in 1994-95,<sup>40</sup> while a few sherds were identified during the 1997 excavations at Musawwarat es Sufra. Others were also noted at that time in collections at Naqa,<sup>41</sup> brought to my attention by Dietrich Wildung and Karla Kroeper. Since then, what appears to be the same fabric has been noted amongst collections at Berber (Fabric B8), along with (unconfirmed) reports of its presence within collections at both Wad ben Naqa and Muweis.<sup>42</sup> That it might be represented among some of the elaborately decorated jars found at Wad ben Naqa<sup>43</sup> might also be suggested. Amongst the very small quantities of Meroitic handmade wares found within the area of medieval Soba, a few sherds of this, or a quite similar fabric(s) (fabrics 18, 62, 68) have also been recorded;<sup>44</sup> the distinctiveness of this fabric(s) again allowing its recognition amongst large quantities of handmade siltwares.

Whether it occurs further south seems likely, but requires confirmation. Rose<sup>45</sup> noted the prevalence of generally 'granitic' wares found at Jebel Moya;<sup>46</sup> Jebel Moya is itself a granitic massif. However, while

32 Smith/ Vince n.d.

33 Bates/ Dunham 1927, Pl. LXIII, 22, 26.

34 Fernandez 1980, 17; 1983, 300, 1204.

35 Edwards 1995, 47; 2013, Pl. 77.

36 Lohwasser 2010.

37 Budka 2007, 87f.

38 Bakowska 2010, fig. 8, no. 81; or perhaps more likely 85.

39 e.g. Shinnie/ Anderson 2004, Pl. VIIa-d, Pl. VIIIa,c.

40 Rose 1998, 166.

41 Edwards 1999a, 18-19.

42 Bashir/ David 2011, 123.

43 Vercoutter 1962, fig. 25, Pl. XX.c; Baud 2010, Pl. 135.

44 Welsby/ Daniels 1991, 238-240; Welsby 1998, 114a.

45 Rose 1996, 129.

46 Addison 1949, 201f.

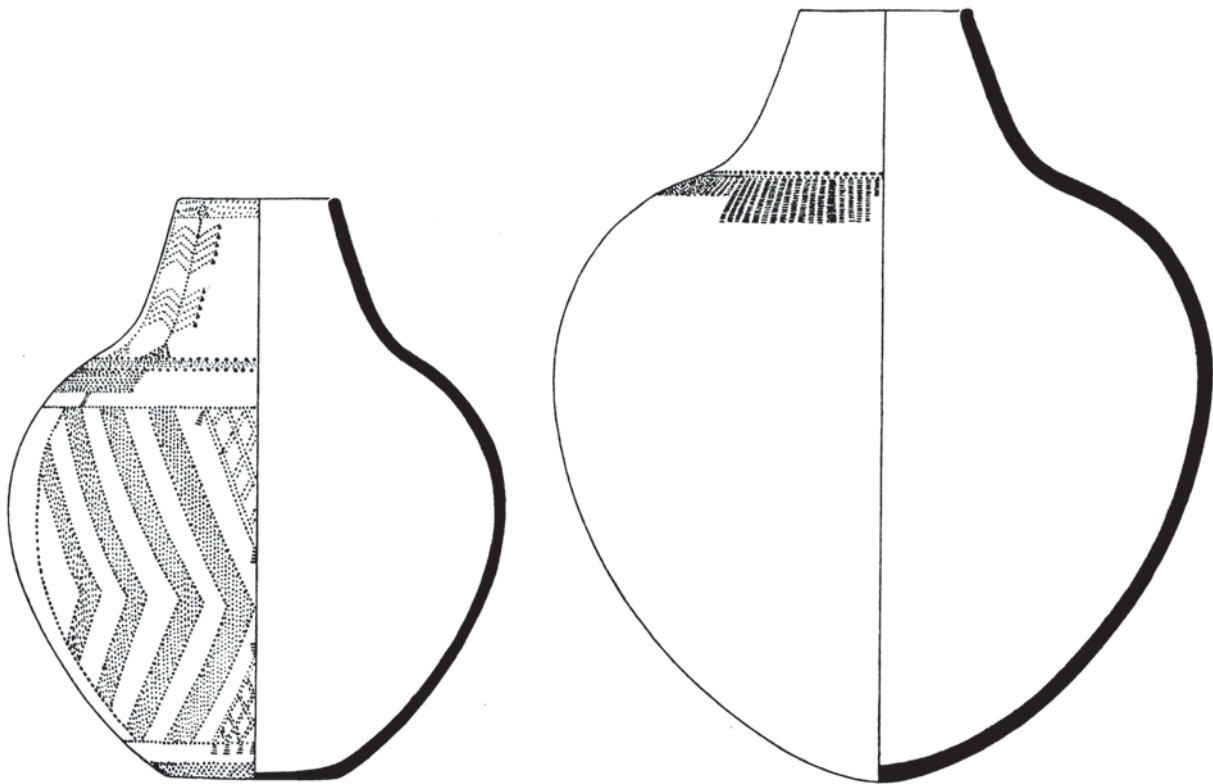


Figure 3: Meroitic (?) jars from Jebel Moya. from grave 100/1293 (right), and 100/2000 (left) (after Addison 1949, Pl. XCII, R.2, R.3)

formal/stylistic comparisons may certainly be drawn between a number of vessels found at Jebel Moya and examples found within clearly Meroitic contexts further north, examples of pottery made with this distinctive fabric cannot be confirmed. One of the more likely examples, a jar from Grave 100/2193 with a quite distinctive decoration (Fig. 3, right), was described as having a 'grey-brown granitic ware with dark brown polished surface',<sup>47</sup> could well be another example of the Ibrim A4/Gabati G7. A few more specific comparisons are also possible confirming links between the southern Gezira and the Meroitic heartlands. One compelling example (Fig.3, left) is found in the highly decorated jar (1) in Grave 100/2000,<sup>48</sup> closely comparable in both form and decoration to Ware A4 vessels at Qasr Ibrim.<sup>49</sup> In this case attention may also be drawn to the flat base, with a band of decoration around it. This very distinctive, if apparently quite rare feature also seems to be present in a vessel with quite similar decoration found at Kadada in 1976 known from photographs<sup>50</sup> but apparently not otherwise published, as well as a cache of highly decorated jars found in the 'palace

magazines' at Wad ben Naqa.<sup>51</sup> The examples at both Kadada and Wad ben Naqa seem to share the same decorative schema combining chevrons and what may well be stylised-sorghum motifs, also seen in the vessel from Amir Abdallah.<sup>52</sup>

That some links existed between Jebel Moya and the Meroitic heartlands has long been considered. However, the more specific linkages made apparent here extending over more than 1000km (the distance from Qasr Ibrim to Jebel Moya) raises more fundamental questions concerning the manufacture and distribution of early Meroitic handmade pottery. If (although this requires confirmation) this ware was a product of the Meroitic heartlands – perhaps produced close to the granitic Sixth Cataract – this would suggest the early existence of specialist workshop producers already contributing to a very widely distributed 'imperial' ceramic culture. That at Jebel Moya we may in fact have rare examples finding their way to, or perhaps well beyond, the southern margins of the Meroitic state is a possibility to be considered, although most other examples come from what is more certainly Meroitic territory.

47 Addison 1949, 92, Pl. XCII, R.2.

48 Addison 1949, 91, Pl. XCII, R.3, Pl. CXI, 3-4.

49 Rose 1996, figs. 4.10-12.

50 Geus 1977, Pl. XVII, 1; 1984, 75.

51 Vercoutter 1962, Pl. XXc.

52 Fernandez 1980, 77.

If the lack of distinctiveness of other Nile clay pottery fabrics makes it impossible to distinguish further different products on such a basis, more general comparisons of forms and decorations further indicate that there co-existed a number of distinct forms of production, including other specialist products, also widely distributed. One may clearly be linked with a range of forms replicating the common shapes naturally occurring in bottle gourds/calabashes.<sup>53</sup> The likely inter-relationship between the forms and decoration of both pottery and gourds/calabashes is very long established in the region, and long recognised,<sup>54</sup> if not more explicitly investigated. The range of forms remains relatively limited, dominated by open bowls and bottles/jars, with varied neck lengths. Differing production techniques employed to make identical vessel forms may also be noted, as perhaps meriting further investigation. While the very distinctive ware (Ibrim A4/Gabati G7) discussed above seems likely to have been produced with a paddle and anvil technique, much other pottery looks to have been coil-built.<sup>55</sup> The use of scraping, often evident on vessels interiors, also varies (see below).

Decoration may relate both to incised/engraved, often geometric designs, and also to the representation of combinations of basketry and/or network, also traceable to with gourd/calabash prototypes. Ethnographic examples of such combinations indicate these may have both practical and decorative purposes, suspension/carrying nets playing a particular role in more mobile populations, a perhaps not insignificant factor in Meroitic milieu with a more pastoral emphasis. Some observed differences in decorative techniques might also have the potential to distinguish different producers. Within the body of material studied at Gabati, for example, potentially significant distinctions emerge in the use of two forms of decoration, the first using comb-impressed decoration and the second incised and wedge-stamped decoration.<sup>56</sup> Similar distinctions may also be apparent in collections from Qasr Ibrim, providing a basis for subdividing the most common decorated handmade ware (Ibrim Ware A1). Some combination of incised and impressed decoration seems to have been encountered at Amir Abdallah<sup>57</sup> although more detailed information on the specific techniques being used there are perhaps required to better differentiate between pottery types. Interestingly we may also

have indications that decorative techniques may also co-vary with the different production techniques. At Gabati, for example, the interiors of jars with comb-impressed decoration were finger impressed, while those with incised/wedge-stamped decoration had scraped interiors.<sup>58</sup> This possible correlation merits further investigation, but that this might assist in distinguishing between handmade products with different origins, seems possible.

Other forms of highly distinctive decoration encountered evoke several other aspects of Sudanic world, as well as the pastoral. Representations of wild animals, notably giraffe and ostrich, as well as cattle, human figures and sorghum plants all seem to relate to Sudanic symbolic repertoires, although their relative rarity marks them off as having more specific, and perhaps restricted, significances. Their novelty should also perhaps be stressed. Their origins are obscure; lacking obvious roots in the Napatan period their appearance would seem to represent a very interesting cultural innovation of the early Meroitic period. Notwithstanding rare exceptions, their lack of obvious parallels in the decorative repertoires of older potting traditions of the second millennium BC also challenges more casual assumptions of the timeless character of handmade pottery.

However, some elements of such decoration can be recognised in other media, perhaps most strikingly in examples of bodily decoration. What are often complex designs including what may be stylised sorghum plants as well as ostriches in (scarification/cicatrization) are known from bodies excavated in the 1960s at Aksha,<sup>59</sup> also noted at Semna in the Batn al-Hajar.<sup>60</sup> The rare cases where such bodily tissues have survived precludes generalisation about how widespread such bodily decoration may have been although evidence from several periods perhaps suggest, that such practices could have been encountered in many periods.<sup>61</sup> That such practices may have strongly gendered seems not unlikely on the basis of ethnographic analogy.<sup>62</sup> Further hints that quite specific female identities may be invoked by such motifs are also possible. The representation of a high-status (?) steatopygous female on a bronze bowl from Karanog<sup>63</sup> shows similar marks of scarification on the woman's abdomen.

The possible significance of other designs remains obscure however. One such motif is that of the

53 e.g. Berns/ Hudson 1986; Dagan 1988.

54 e.g. Caneva 1988, 199; Fernandez 1983, 302.

55 e.g. Rose 1996, 118-121.

56 Rose 1998, 165.

57 Fernandez 1983, 339ff.

58 Rose 1998, 165f.

59 Vila 1967, 368-377.

60 Alvrus et al. 2001.

61 e.g. Williams 1983, 97-99, pls. 102-3.

62 e.g. Faris 1972; Chappel 1977.

63 Woolley/ Randall-MacIver 1910, Pl. 27.

'giraffe' figure (Fig.4). While not found on pottery from non-funerary contexts at Qasr Ibrim, nor at Amir Abdallah in Middle Nubia such decoration is known from Meroitic burials in several cemeteries in the Second Cataract region, for example at Gemai, Buhen, Aksha, Faras, Argin and Qustul.<sup>64</sup> While most frequently encountered in the north this does not appear to be a regionally specific form of decoration and the motif is also encountered at sites in the Meroitic heartlands, such as Gabati and Kadada.<sup>65</sup> Ostrich motifs are also encountered across a similar wide geographic range.<sup>66</sup>

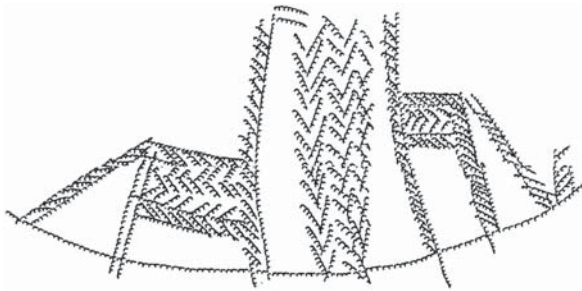


Figure 4: 'Giraffe' design, from handmade jar at Gabati, central Sudan (after Edwards 1998, fig. 6.21)

In general terms most of the decoration of handmade pottery contrasts markedly with the symbolic repertoires encountered in wheelmade pottery, wherein the influences of Meroitic state religion, and indeed contemporary Egyptian cults are often very manifest.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, it is worth noting that in later centuries we may still encounter some 'Sudanic' motifs on wheelmade pottery, for example in the form of sorghum motifs encountered at several sites in the Shendi-Berber region.<sup>68</sup> Occasional representations of giraffe on wheelmade jars found in Lower Nubia<sup>69</sup> present examples of such 'Sudanic' motifs appearing in an environment where such wildlife was perhaps already quite alien. As with the handmade pottery, their significance remains obscure, although such examples suggest further links between apparently quite distinct types of pottery production. More familiar religious motifs such as the

lotus flower may on occasions also be found both on handmade vessels<sup>70</sup> as well as wheelmade products. Notwithstanding the shift in technology towards wheel-thrown pottery at the end of the first century BC (?) and the development of often quite elaborate new decorative styles, other linkages between the handmade and wheelmade workshop production may also be suggested.

At a most basic level, as was very evident at Gabati, some jar forms were adopted directly to wheelmade production, maintaining both the size and shape, for example. As such, a new technology was being used to make exactly the same vessel forms, apparently meeting the same functional requirements. The development of new forms showing the influence of contemporary styles in Egypt and the Mediterranean world may well have been a more extended process. In jar forms this may be traced in the development of more elaborate modelled rims, and (more rarely) ring bases and handles. In smaller forms, styles of some ledge-rimmed and plain bowls more closely follow contemporary styles of the ubiquitous red-slipped products of the Mediterranean world, albeit providing local copies of only a very small part of the range of forms being produced in contemporary Egypt.<sup>71</sup>

While the chronological controls still remain poor it may well be that in some locales handmade workshops were supplanted by wheel-using workshops, although it seems unlikely that all handmade production disappeared, even in the Meroitic 'urban' heartlands. Examples of more simply or often undecorated handmade wares, found in both central Sudan and Lower Nubia (Fig. 5), would suggest that some such production continued throughout the Meroitic period. One might expect the level of production in turn related to the availability of/access to wheelmade products, a factor likely to be determined by various social and well as 'economic' choices. The evident reappearance of handmade pottery in increasing quantities by the third century AD, as seen as Kadada,<sup>72</sup> further suggests that some handmade producers continued to operate, albeit perhaps distinct from the urban wheelmade workshops. The apparent disappearance of widely distributed handmade wares is perhaps suggestive of smaller scale producers with more localised distribution networks.

That this was, at least initially, a primarily technological shift, with the adoption of wheel throwing and perhaps new firing techniques, raises several further questions concerning an apparent disjunc-

64 Gemai: Bates/ Dunham 1927, p. LXIII, fig. 22; Buhen: Randall-MacIver/ Woolley 1911, Pl. 69; Aksha: Vila 1967, Pl. IV; Faras: Griffiths 1924, Pl. XLIII; Argin: Garcia/ Teixidor 1965, figs. 9.1, 28.2; Qustul: Williams 1991, fig. 18f.

65 Gabati: Rose 1998, 165; Kadada: Geus 1984, 75.

66 Rose 1998, fig. 6.25; Woolley and Randall-MacIver 1910, Pl. 102, 8735.

67 e.g. Williams 1991, 35-72; El Hassan 2004.

68 e.g. Bashir/ David 2011, 127, figs. 3-5; Edwards 1999a, Pl. IX, 825, 835.

69 e.g. Woolley/ Randall-MacIver 1910, Pls. 41-3.

70 Griffith 1924, Pl. XLI, 20.

71 e.g. Rodziewicz 2005, pls. 56-81.

72 Geus/ Lenoble 1985; Lenoble 1994.





Figure 5: Meroitic handmade cup from Faras (from grave 934), (image ©Trustees of the British Museum)

ture between Napatan and early Meroitic potting traditions. To what extent, and in what contexts was there wheelmade pottery manufacture during the later Napatan and early Meroitic centuries? The only site where excavations span this long period, Meroe, unfortunately provides no clear answers. Existing publications provide no indication of a significant gap in the production of wheelmade ceramics in the early centuries of the Meroitic period. The limited analysis of the pottery recovered during the 1973-84 excavations does however seem to confirm the continued existence of a significant wheelmade presence along with handmade material in the early Meroitic 'Pottery Period 30 (350BC)'.<sup>73</sup>

Any consideration of the longer-term development of Meroitic pottery, and the shift to wheelmade manufacture must also be contextualised in relation to changes in the ways pottery was being used. Such an awareness is now apparent in some studies within settlement sites,<sup>74</sup> and suggests that a more explicit interest in the function of vessel types may also be productive. The recognition of functional equivalences between types of handmade and wheelmade pottery may also be important. In this respect, that many of the 'beer jars' deposited in earlier Meroitic

burials may indeed be related to grain beers finds further support in recent ethnographic studies in Ethiopia<sup>75</sup> which identify very distinctive wear/corrosion patterns within 'beer jars', probably reflecting the increased acidity of the fermented product.<sup>76</sup> Just such heavy erosion of the bases of jars was noted at Gabati; one example being one of the elaborately decorated 'giraffe' jars.<sup>77</sup> Such a functional association may in turn be contrasted with that of the small 'black bottles'<sup>78</sup> which appear as a possibly new, and different, element of funerary ritual in the later Meroitic centuries. A better understanding of pottery use and functions is also of course important when tracing changes in Meroitic burial practice. Little pottery was being deposited in Meroitic burials in the earlier centuries, and very little at all in elite burials at Meroe. By contrast metal vessels were much more widely used in elite burials and in fact not uncommon in other contexts (e.g. Gereif, Geili). It seems only to be in the late first century BC (?) that pottery began to be deposited in increasingly large quantities in burials, including elite burials. This same period sees the development of the new types of kaolinitic finewares with their great range of forms and often elaborate painted and/or impressed decoration. Close parallels may also be found between both the forms and decoration of fine pottery and contemporary copper alloy vessels, which seem to have been widely used in cult practices throughout the Kushite period. This is particularly noticeable in some of the earlier products, decorated in a clear and precise 'Academic Style'<sup>79</sup> often closely paralleling engraved decoration on metalwork.

Why there was this shift towards a greater use of pottery in burials remains uncertain, although this would seem to relate to significant changes in the nature of funerary rituals as much as wider changes in ceramic culture. The more abundant ceramics deposited in graves may relate to an increased prominence of grain-beer in burial rites. If related to status displays, this could in turn be associated with status linked to the control of agricultural resources.<sup>80</sup> That by the later Meroitic centuries large quantities of grain-beer could be deployed in funerary contexts,<sup>81</sup> in fact marks a very major shift in practice. However, that the development of such new practices broadly coincided with the shift to a predominantly

73 Interestingly it also provides intriguing hints of possible handmade prototypes for the later stamped kaolinitic finewares (Robertson and Hill 2004, 130, Pl. VIIc), a further indication of possible linkages between both forms of manufacture.

74 e.g. Dittrich 2010.

75 Arthur 2003; 2006.

76 Arthur 2003, 524.

77 Welsby/ Anderson 2004, 268, no. 252.

78 Lenoble 1995.

79 Wenig 1979.

80 see also Arthur 2003, 523.

81 Lenoble 1994.

wheelmade pottery production may in fact be coincidental. In turn with the reappearance of handmade workshops some centuries later, still producing large quantities of ‘beer jars’, the emphasis being placed on grain-beers in funerary rites continues unchanged well into the ‘post-Meroitic’ centuries. The transformation from the use of wheelmade ‘Meroitic’ ceramic to handmade ‘post-Meroitic’ pottery (as traditionally perceived) seems again to have had little impact on this aspect of burial practices, as recognised at Kadada by Lenoble.<sup>82</sup> The circumstances in which this tradition of burial later disappeared still remain uncertain, but again perhaps lacks direct link with another series of ceramic transformation underway in the early medieval period.

### Conclusions

On the basis of the still sparse evidence at our disposal, a number of suggestions may be offered concerning the early development of Meroitic ceramics. Sufficient material is now available to suggest the early existence of a repertoire of quite standardised handmade pottery, some at least quite elaborately decorated, distributed throughout the kingdom. The more elaborated/decorated wares seem likely to have specifically ritual associations, which also ensured their deposition in burials. Their relatively standardised forms and decoration, encountered across large areas suggests the early existence of specialised regional (?) workshops. The wide distribution of at least one highly distinctive fabric probably attributable to a single workshop (Ibrim A4/Gabati G7), does however confirm the existence of mechanisms to distribute some handmade pottery very widely, throughout and perhaps beyond the kingdom. The (still unpublished) finds from Wad ben Naqa suggest possible royal associations with at least some products.

The wider repertoires produced in the early Meroitic period have yet to be determined, although the material from Amir Abdallah may represent the most complete collection at our disposal, including the perhaps specialised and decorated ‘ritual’ beer jars as well as a range of more functional coarsewares. It may be suggested that within sherd assemblages recovered from settlement sites, such material might be expected to produce quite limited collections in all but the largest-scale excavations. Even within early Meroitic cemetery sites, the quantities of ceramics burials deposited remain quite small. In general

terms, the quantities of pottery in circulation (as well as being deposited in graves) may well have been much less than in later periods. As such the relative scarcity of known early Meroitic sites may well, at least in part, be a factor of their reduced visibility. On the evidence of the one large collection of Early Meroitic pottery so far published (Amir Abdallah), much of that pottery would be difficult to identify when encountered in small sherd collections, unlike most Meroitic wheelmade wares which are quite readily identifiable.

As a related issue, this also raises interesting questions about the specific social contexts in which the potter’s craft could be practised; by whom, and how it might have been organised? A question which remains largely unexplored in Nubian archaeology more generally is how forms of craft production might be organised in any early Sudanic kingdom. Where we can be reasonably confident that little Meroitic handmade pottery was in fact a ‘domestic’ craft, how and where did its manufacture take place? In more recent centuries we have many examples of how various crafts, but especially pottery manufacture and ironworking, have been the domain of endogamous ‘caste’ groups. Ethnographically recorded as commonly strongly gendered, historically these are not only a feature of western Sudanic world,<sup>83</sup> if less evident in more recent centuries in eastern Sudanic Africa.<sup>84</sup> The antiquity and origins of such ‘castes’ however remains obscure, although apparently always grounded in unequal political and social relationships with dominant elites. As with the case of Meroitic iron-working, interesting issues may be raised about labour specialisation, the political processes, which came to control them, and their subsequent histories as political power ebbed and flowed around such (caste?) groups. That we might consider the existence of ‘royal potters’,<sup>85</sup> as well as more general association of specialist potters with the state and its urban/royal centres, may perhaps be suggested. As in West Africa with the Malian empire, it is perhaps not unlikely that the Meroitic kingdom with its novel ‘urban’ spaces provided similar conditions in which groups of politically subordinate (or indeed ‘unfree’) ‘castes’ came into being, and in turn may have come to play important roles in the material production of Meroitic imperial culture.

Rather than being relegated to part of a timeless ‘African’ tradition these need instead to be investigated in terms of an early phase of the construction of

<sup>82</sup> Edwards 2011.

<sup>83</sup> e.g. Conrad and Frank 1995; Sterner and David 1991; Haour 2013.

<sup>84</sup> e.g. Tobert 1988.

<sup>85</sup> e.g. Gibli/ Remigius 2012.

a 'Meroitic' imperial culture. Only later was this to take on its more familiar forms with the dominance of wheel-using workshops, perhaps new firing techniques, and more general openness to Hellenistic/Roman influences. If we can acknowledge early Meroitic handmade pottery as a new cultural form, it is perhaps time to move beyond more traditional approaches which have assumed a timeless character to such handmade pottery, permitting easy comparisons across millennia. As such, ahistorical comparisons between, for example, C-Group bowls (of the late third millennium BC) and Meroitic vessels in the later first millennium BC serve no purpose and ignore the novelty of this new ceramic culture. What we can suggest is that many aspects of early Meroitic pottery forms and decoration seem grounded in Sudanic material culture traditions. On the other hand, it is as yet hard to identify linkages with late Napatan traditions, notwithstanding the likely persistence of some wheelmade production in the early Meroitic period (at Meroe?). For those interested in the origins of the 'Meroitic' state as distinct from an earlier 'Napatan' kingdom, tracing the development of such cultural forms perhaps offers a new route to explore.

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TITELBILD: Säulenbasis mit Löwe, Große Anlage von Musawwarat es Sufra, Raum 108  
(Foto: Claudia Näser)

FRONTISPIZ: Der Jubilar im Garten seines Hauses in Berlin-Karow  
(Foto: Jane Humphris, Bildbearbeitung: Frank Joachim)

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# DANK

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