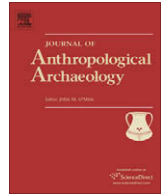




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Anthropological Archaeology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jaa

Shifting social networks along the Nile: Middle Holocene ceramic assemblages from Sai Island, Sudan

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 January 2009

Revision received 18 May 2009

Available online 25 June 2009

Keywords:

Archaeology
Nile
Middle Holocene
Sudan
Sahara
Ceramics
Social differentiation

ABSTRACT

During the middle Holocene, profound changes in environment, economy, and social relations laid the foundations for the emergence of Africa's earliest polities: the Egyptian Old Kingdom and the Kerma state. Regional shifts in economy and society may be reflected in local changes in patterning of ceramic production and exchange. Analysis of two pottery assemblages from Sai Island, north Sudan, reveals dramatic shifts in the scale of cultural spheres and the nature of cross-cultural interaction between 5000 BC (Khartoum Variant) and 2600 BC (Pre-Kerma). Near-sedentary Khartoum Variant hunter-gatherers at site 8-B-10C participated in a longstanding cultural sphere that extended far into the Sahara, but were beginning to focus more tightly on resources by the Nile. By Pre-Kerma times, Sai occupants familiar with animal husbandry started to use southwest Asian plant domesticates; they began to experiment with large-scale storage facilities and engage in long-distance trade along the Nile, outside of their own cultural boundaries. Beyond a shift in axes for contact from east–west to north–south, these changes signal progressive geographic and temporal compression of cultural entities, amidst accelerating processes of economic innovation and social change that finally culminated in the polities of Egypt and Kerma.

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Introduction

Africa's earliest polities, the Egyptian Old Kingdom and the Kerma state, began in distinct ways. Northern and southern Egypt was united by a divine ruler by c. 3100 BC (4200 BP¹), whose successors pursued increasingly elaborate monumental constructions and written texts with names, titles and symbols of the pharaonic power, and managed a vast network of officials and clerics (Wengrow, 2006). Kerma saw the development of a large fortified town with centralized storage and decision-making by c. 2500 BC (3600 BP), followed by an adoption of large stone-ringed tumuli, often with numerous cattle heads, for elites in neighboring areas (Bonnet, 1992; O'Connor, 1993). Although the immediate contexts of the emergence of these two polities are well studied, the deeper roots of their divergent trajectories of social change lie in the more obscure, shifting cultural landscape of the middle Holocene (6000–4000 BP) Nile and eastern Sahara.

These two millennia saw profound changes in environment, economy, and social organization that laid the foundations for the development of complex societies. Six thousand years ago, the eastern Sahara still held verdant areas, which had supported

intensive gathering, fishing and hunting for the previous three millennia, evidenced in Nubia by the Early Khartoum and Khartoum Variant complexes (Friedman, 2002). By 6000 BP, herding of cattle and small stock was practiced in some areas, but plant food production (emmer wheat and barley) was not yet known south of the Nile delta and Fayum (Wengrow, 2006). Only by 4000 BP had southwest Asian crops reached northern Sudan, as shown by the Pre-Kerma culture; social stratification and long-distance trade had begun in Egypt and areas farther south; and multiple cultural groups existed along the Nile. These changes entailed social differentiation, both within and between cultural groups.

Examining discrete forms of social differentiation is vital to the larger anthropological task of understanding the origins and development of social complexity. In this paper, we consider inter-group social differentiation evident in ceramic production, long recognized as a leading cultural marker in northeastern Africa (Gatto, 2002a; Garcea, 2006b; Lange and Nordström, 2006) and other regions (e.g., Blinkhorn, 1997; Livingstone Smith, 2001b; Roux, 2003; Garcea, 2005; Livingstone Smith et al., 2005). In fact, the various stages of pottery manufacturing processes (chaînes opératoires), from raw material acquisition and production to use and discard, can suggest distinct technical behaviors that are significant for recognizing cultural identities, as indicated in both the ethnographic (Arnold, 1985; Bowser, 2000; Gosselain, 2000; Livingstone Smith, 2000, 2001a) and archaeological records (Rice, 1996; Sillar and Tite, 2000; Tite, 2008). The Nabta/Kiseiba area of

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¹ All BP dates are in radiocarbon years.

the Egyptian Western Desert is one of the earliest instances of ceramic production in the world, beginning with low-mobility hunter–fisher–gatherers of the early Holocene, at sites dating from the 10th millennium BP (Wendorf and Schild, 2001). Therefore, pottery bears enduring cultural and social traditions, which became established long before the beginning of food production.

Our study area, between the Second and Third Cataracts, lies between the emerging polities of Egypt and Kerma, and within interaction networks that ran both along the Nile and between river and desert. To gain a clearer view of the causes and processes of social differentiation, we make a diachronic comparison of two sites on Sai Island, which occupies a pivotal place amidst emerging cultural spheres of the middle Holocene (Fig. 1). Site 8-B-10C, dated to 6080 ± 35 BP (5070–4900 cal. BC) (KIA-24463) and 5980 ± 40 BP (4950–4770 cal. BC) (KIA-24464), has pottery from the Khartoum Variant ceramic tradition. Site 8-B-52A dates to 4151 ± 44 BP (UtC-5295) and 4142 ± 48 BP (UtC-5294), or 2872–2612 cal. BC; its ceramic assemblage has mainly pre-Kerma pottery, but some

sherds also show affinities to A-Group. Comparing ceramics from these two sites, and determining how they relate to regional pottery traditions, provides an interesting case study of local cultural change in the context of broader shifts in environment, technology, and exchange.

We begin by discussing the ways in which ceramics may have served as cultural markers in prehistory. Next we describe the physical context of Sai Island, including attributes that held constant over time and other traits that responded to changes in rainfall and Nile flow. We then consider the potential involvement of Sai occupants in each of the several regional cultural traditions during the early and middle Holocene. Turning to the actual analysis of ceramics from 8-B-10C and 8-B-52A, we examine their implications for shifting spheres of interaction and cultural demarcation between 6000 and 4200 BP. Finally, we explore the reasons for these shifts, and the causes of regional cultural differentiation that culminated in the separate polities of ancient Egypt and Kerma, with their respective satellites.

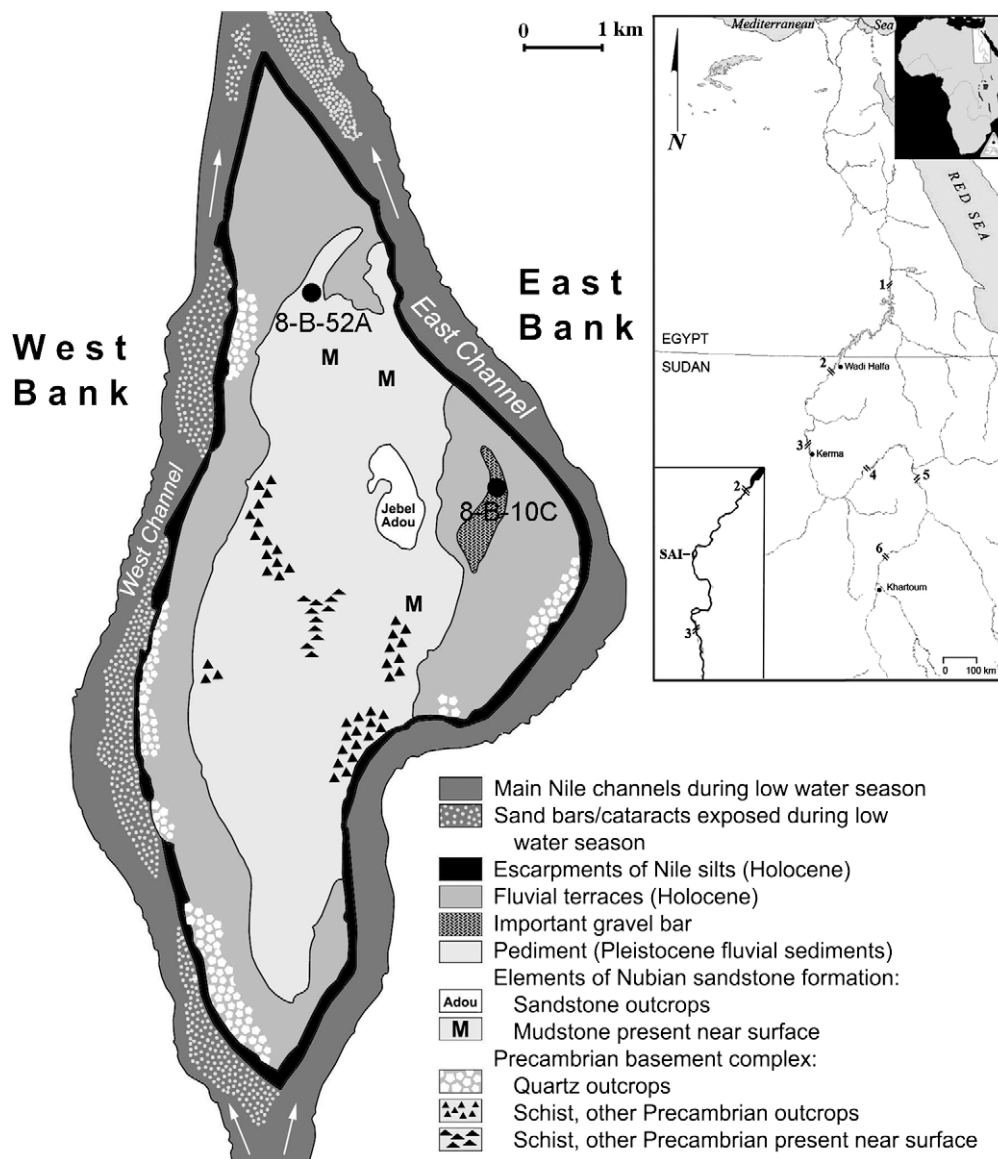


Fig. 1. Sai Island: Geographical context, geological features, and sites mentioned in the text. Geographers often divide the Nile into three areas: The Upper Nile (Blue and White Nile watershed areas upstream from Khartoum), the Middle Nile (the stretch between Khartoum and the First Cataract) and the Lower Nile (areas downstream from the First Cataract). Nubia is also divided into three subareas: Upper Nubia (from the Fifth to the Second Cataract) and Lower Nubia (from the Second to the First Cataract).

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