

# SUDAN

ANCIENT  
TREASURES



# CONTRIBUTORS

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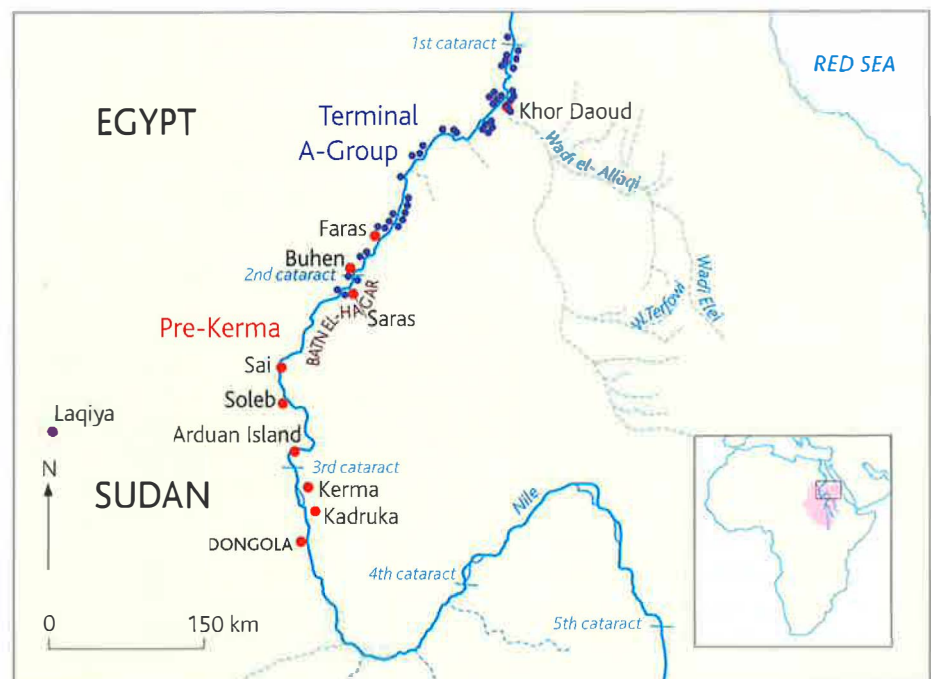
## THE PRE-KERMA PERIOD

MATTHIEU HONEGGER

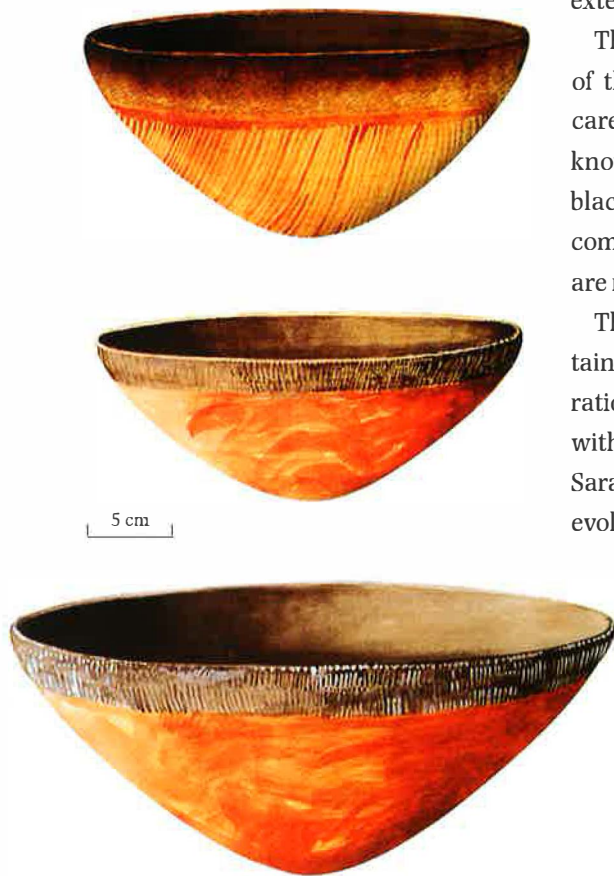
While several excavations and surveys in conjunction with the building of the Aswan High Dam permitted archaeologists to acquire a good knowledge of the protohistoric periods of Lower Nubia, the same is not the case for the territory of Upper Nubia, lying between the Second and Fourth Cataracts. Recent archaeological research has revealed the presence of a population, contemporary with and later than the A-Group, the most plentiful evidence for which is currently found in the area of the Third Cataract. This population has been named Pre-Kerma because its geographic location is different from that of the A-Group and its ceramics are distinct in some respects, even though it has certain elements in common with its cousin in Lower Nubia.<sup>1</sup> The Pre-Kerma constitutes the cultural substratum from which the Kerma civilization developed.

The Pre-Kerma is currently known only at a few sites and its extent is yet to be defined clearly.<sup>2</sup> One can, however, estimate that it was located between the area to the south of the Second Cataract and the environs of Dongola (fig. 40).

40 Map showing location of the Pre-Kerma sites in Upper Nubia. The Middle Pre-Kerma is represented at Kerma and at Arduan. The late Pre-Kerma seems to correspond to the B-Group as defined by B. Gratién on the basis of the finds at Buhen (1995). It is found at Kerma, Sai, Faras, Buhen and Saras and also seems to occur in the Laqiya Oasis.



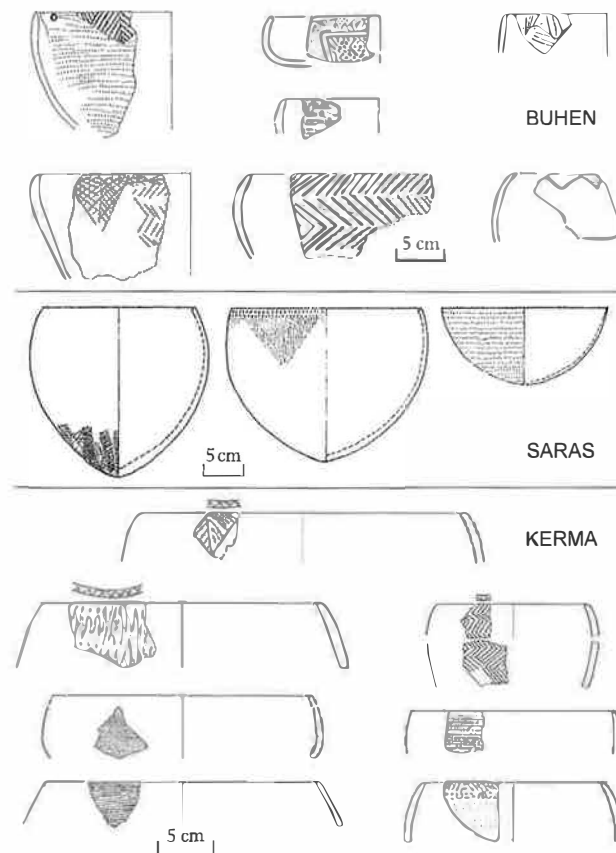
41 A watercolour reconstruction of middle Pre-Kerma pottery (c. 3000 BC). Red bowls with a black mouth, decorated with a rippled band on the upper part, are characteristic of this culture.



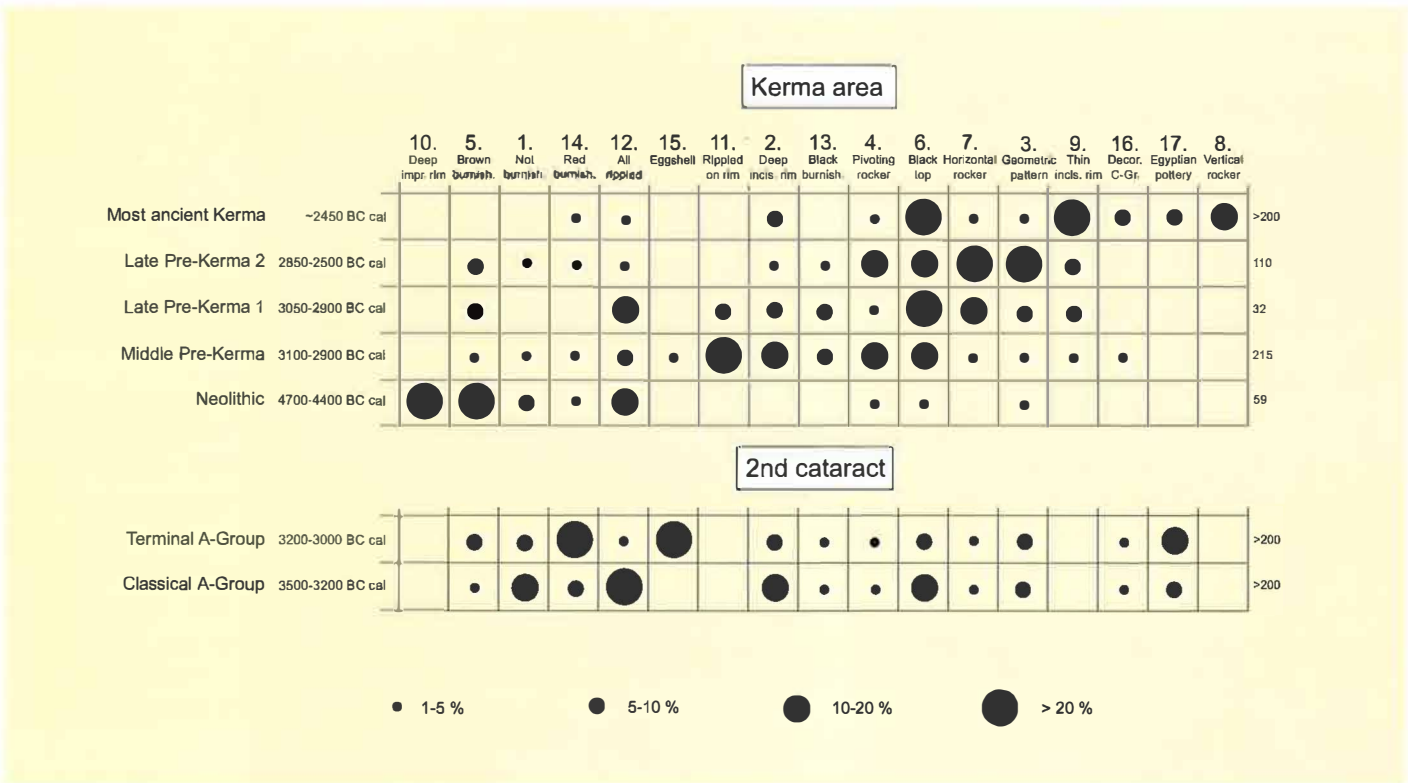
Chronologically this culture began during the fourth millennium BC and ended with the emergence of the Kerma civilization around 2500 BC. The dating carried out so far, together with the first studies of the pottery, permit us to distinguish a middle phase around 3000 BC, and a late phase between 2900 and 2600 BC. The oldest period, which is not yet documented, probably dates to the middle of the fourth millennium BC. It follows the late Neolithic which is well known thanks to the discovery of several cemeteries and settlements in the vast alluvial plain extending south from Kerma.<sup>3</sup>

The Pre-Kerma pottery shares several similarities with A-Group ceramics. Many of the dishes and bowls found are red with black mouths, and their surfaces are carefully polished. A fine rippled decoration evokes a decorative technique well known in Lower Nubia, but here it is limited to the upper part of the pottery in the black-coloured area (fig. 41). Some rare pots present a more elaborate decoration composed of motifs in bands and red-coloured lines on a beige background. They are reminiscent of the eggshell pottery found at the end of the A-Group period.

The late Pre-Kerma period has a slightly different ceramic repertoire and contains some precursor elements of the *Kerma Ancien*. The most characteristic decoration is composed of combed horizontal impressions and geometric motifs made with fishbones (fig. 42). This pottery is found at Kerma and further north at Sai, Saras, Buhen and Faras. In the Kerma area it has been possible to reconstruct the evolution of pottery between 3000 and 2400 BC in detail (fig. 43). It demonstrates



42 Late Pre-Kerma pottery (c. 2900–2600 BC). The assemblage found at Kerma shows definite similarities with finds at Buhen (Gratien 1995) and with those from Site 11-Q-72 at Saras (Mills 1967–8).



43 A typological comparison between Neolithic, Pre-Kerma, *Kerma Ancien* and A-Group, on the basis of the relative frequency of seventeen types of pottery. This typology shows a progressive transition between the middle Pre-Kerma and *Kerma Ancien*. Classic and terminal A-Group material is clearly distinct from the assemblages found in the area of Kerma.

cultural continuity between the Pre-Kerma and *Kerma Ancien*, as well as a certain degree of autonomy in relation to the A-Group. No Egyptian imported pottery has been found at Kerma amongst the settlements dated to between 3000 and 2600 BC, and thus there do not appear to have been any contacts with this civilization. Egyptian imports are on the other hand found further north on Sai Island, to the south of the Batn el-Hagar, where a settlement dating to the late Pre-Kerma phase has yielded some storage pits, of which one contained a jar dating to the earliest Egyptian dynasties.<sup>4</sup> Despite this discovery, the Pre-Kerma does not appear to have played an active role as a trading partner with Egypt. It was, however, involved in exchanges with the A-Group in its middle phase, the A-Group taking the role of middleman and passing the merchandise further north. Similarities in the style of the pottery and also the presence of objects characteristic of Lower Nubia, discovered in two Pre-Kerma burials, testify to these contacts.<sup>5</sup> The establishment of direct commercial relations between Egypt and Upper Nubia does not seem to have begun before the *Kerma Ancien* period.

1 The Pre-Kerma was first defined in 1986, on the occasion of the discovery in the Kerma region of a settlement dating to c. 3000 BC (Bonnet 1988).  
 2 Three Pre-Kerma sites are known in the Kerma region (Honegger 2002). Two other sites have been noted, one on Arduan Island (Edwards and Osman

2000), the other on Sai Island (Geus 1998).  
 3 Reinold 1993b; Welsby 2001d.  
 4 Meurillon 1997.  
 5 Two quartzite palettes and a copper needle with square section have been discovered in two burials of 3000 BC in the Kerma region (Honegger 1999).

# THE PRE-KERMA SETTLEMENT AT KERMA

MATTHIEU HONEGGER

**R**esearch on the Pre-Kerma period at Kerma is unique in that excavation there has exposed a vast area enabling study of much of the settlement.<sup>1</sup> Sealed beneath the Eastern Cemetery of Kerma, the settlement plan is unique and shows the organization of a Nubian village around 3000 BC. It is composed of nearly 300 storage pits, as well as numerous wooden structures of which only post-holes remain. These structures consist of huts, palisades, rectangular buildings and cattle pens (fig. 44).

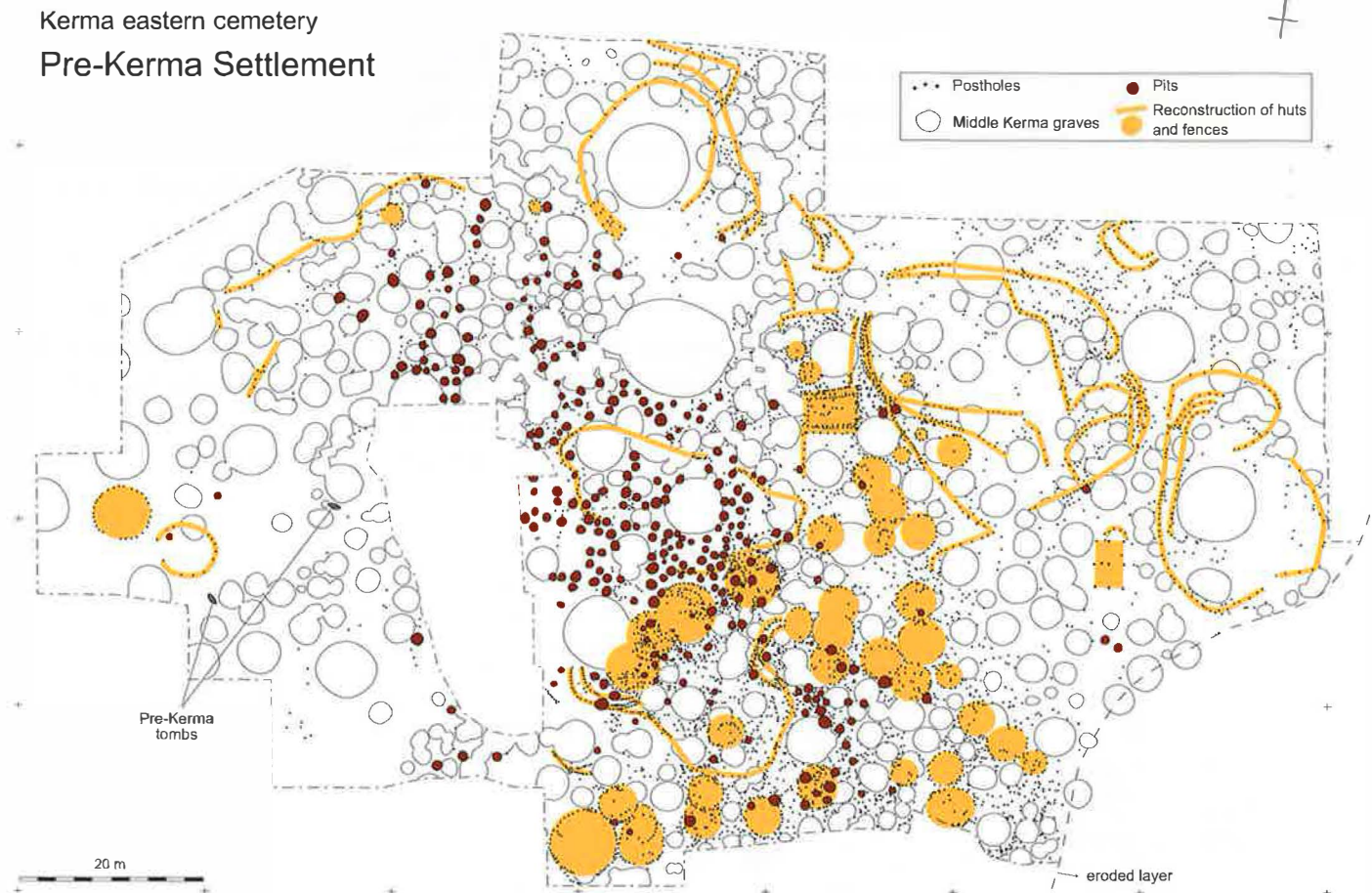
Preservation of the occupation surfaces is not always very good, erosion having caused the disappearance of the remains in several areas. Furthermore, Kerma burials dug several centuries after the abandonment of the village and the associated installations connected with their funerary ceremonies have disturbed the underlying surface. Despite these drawbacks, it has

been possible to expose many architectural structures within an area of nearly 1 ha. The total extent of the agglomeration is, however, not known; it was probably in the region of 2 ha.

A total of 285 pits have been excavated (fig. 45). The construction of the later Kerma tombs has presumably destroyed a large number. However, one can estimate that originally there must have been close to 500. With the exception of two containing entire pots, the pits have not yielded more than a few fragmentary objects. They give the impression of having been emptied before the abandonment of the village and have in no instance been reused as depositories. Their function must have been for storing food stuffs as is the case with the pits on Sai Island and in Khor Daoud.<sup>2</sup>

Several types of construction have been recognized due to the orientation of the post-holes. The most

44 Plan of the Pre-Kerma settlement located in the same area as the Eastern Cemetery of Kerma (c. 3000 BC).



45 *Right* Storage pits during the course of excavation. In the foreground are two jars in a pit.



47 *Far right* Rectangular building rebuilt three times. In the background are three palisades. The round structures correspond to the Kerma period tombs.



46 Post-holes of huts of different diameters. The round structures correspond to the tombs of the Kerma period.

numerous are approximately fifty huts, the diameters of which vary between one and several metres (fig. 46). The majority of these huts had a diameter close to 4 m and must have been used as dwellings. The other structures, with dimensions approaching 7 m, could have had special functions, for example as dwellings of important individuals, communal meeting places, or workshops. As for the structures of about a metre in diameter, these may have been enclosures for small livestock.

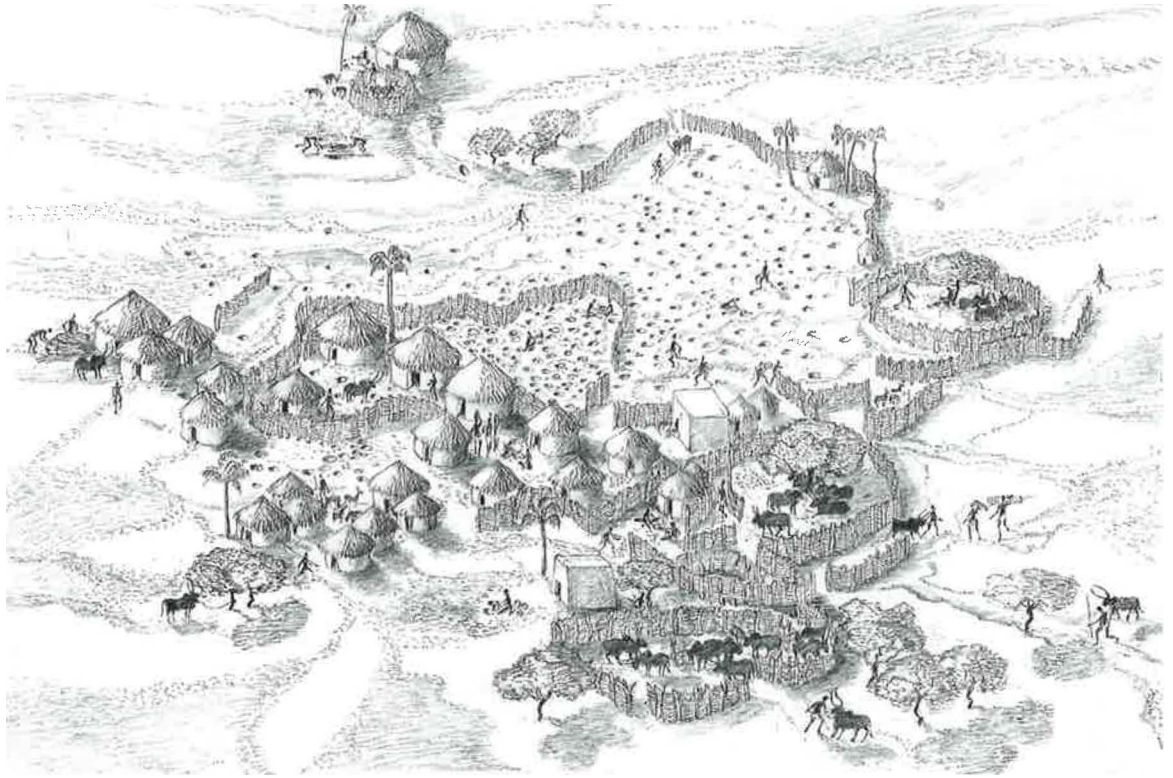
Two rectangular buildings, quite different from each other, have been excavated. One follows an east-west orientation and was rebuilt three times in the same place (fig. 47). The other was orientated to the north and located on the periphery of the settlement. It was made of posts whose diameter was twice the norm. These rectangular buildings were undoubtedly intended for a specific function, which distinguishes them from the domestic huts. The successive reconstructions and unusual dimensions of the post-holes underline the important role that these buildings must have played in the community.

Certain regular alignments of posts can only correspond to palisades. These are sometimes double or triple, suggesting that they were built at different times or that they were reinforced. While some mark boundaries within the inhabited area, the majority are located on the periphery of the settlement. They form vast oval structures that resemble cattle enclosures, like those found on the outskirts of modern East African villages occupied by pastoralists.<sup>3</sup> It is known that raising cattle was a fundamental pursuit within Nubian society. In some well-preserved areas, hoof-prints of cattle have been found in the mud, which confirm the presence of cattle throughout the settlement. The location of the enclosures on the border of the settled area could equally fulfil a defensive function in the manner of the wooden fortifications observed in the city of Kerma.<sup>4</sup>

The settlement was organized in a coherent manner,



48 Reconstruction of the Pre-Kerma settlement. The reconstruction of the huts, the palisades and the rectangular buildings is inspired by modern-day villages in East Africa, as well as by ceramic scale models of mud houses found in an archaeological context.



which permits us to propose an architectural reconstruction of the whole (fig. 48).<sup>5</sup> The pits were grouped together and their distribution was in an area separate from the huts. As for the rectangular buildings, these were close to the cattle enclosures. The rebuilding of these structures was fairly frequent and testifies to several phases of occupation. The logic of the reconstructions and the presence of numerous storage structures underline the continuous occupation of the area. The population that lived there was sedentary and practised a mixed economy. The use of agriculture is confirmed by the importance of the storage areas, while the presence of the enclosures suggests animal husbandry.

It is possible to establish parallels between the Pre-Kerma settlement and the ancient city of Kerma, of which the oldest structures cleared must date to around 2300–2200 BC. In fact, one finds in the city certain architectural traditions inherited from the preceding period, notably the huts, storage pits and systems of palisades associated with the entrances to the city. But the similarities seem to stop there: the architecture that dominates at Kerma is in mud brick, a material that was apparently unknown in the Pre-Kerma period. The buildings were generally rectangular and had internal subdivisions. The structuring of space followed an urban scheme, with monumental buildings and a hierarchical street system. All of these elements represent novelties within Nubian architecture, of which we still lack the

earliest stages and on which the influences of Egyptian civilization probably played a not inconsiderable part.

#### ADDENDUM

During the recent 2003–4 field campaign an area of 1,000 m<sup>2</sup> was investigated north of the enclosures. It revealed an extremely high density of post-holes. The impressions of posts were still preserved and the remains of foundations and walls could be observed. When put together they define an entrance 8 m wide, bordered by two massive constructions from 15 to 25 m wide, which seem to correspond to bastions. It is still too early to describe in detail this imposing system of access. However, this discovery stimulates further interest in the Pre-Kerma town, which may have been more extensive and complex than previously supposed.

1 This site has been the object of excavation for a decade by the University of Geneva (Honegger 2002; 2003).

2 See further Geus 1998; Meurillon 1997; Piotrovsky 1967.

3 Denyer 1978.

4 Bonnet 1993; 1997.

5 This reconstruction depicts one phase of the village and does not take into account reconstructions and realignments of the structures. It renders a partial image of the settlement, its limits not being known except in the area where the animal enclosures developed.



46

#### 46 Awls

Copper alloy, bone

Kerma, Eastern Cemetery, Graves 1 and 2

Pre-Kerma

L 122 mm, W 4 mm, Th 3 mm

L 123 mm, W 26 mm, Th 21 mm

SNM 31134 (copper alloy), 31135 (bone)

The copper-alloy awl is slender, undecorated and rectangular in section. Its function was probably more decorative than utilitarian. It is an import from Lower Nubia or Egypt, as metalworking was not yet being practised in Upper Nubia around the end of the fourth millennium BC. This type recalls examples known from the A-Group and shows contacts between this culture and that of Pre-Kerma. Such awls are rare; they generally accompany burials of high rank, most usually of females (Nordström 1972, 123). The bone awl represents a more common object. Made from the ulna of a sheep or goat, its extremity has been shaped in such a way as to form a point. This will have been used to perforate soft substances such as skin or leather, which were important elements of the clothing of the pastoral populations of the period. MH

#### 47 Palettes

Quartzite

Kerma, Eastern Cemetery, Graves 1 and 2

Pre-Kerma

L 106 mm, W 50 mm, Th 18 mm

L 171 mm, W 110 mm, Th 31 mm

SNM 31120, 31132

The smaller palette, from Grave 1, is roughly lozenge-shaped with convex faces and rounded edges. The other is oval with rounded edges, again with convex faces. Both taper down towards the edges and are made of quartzite. The two faces of these palettes are polished and their extremities present slight traces of percussion. They were found in graves located near the Pre-Kerma settlement. The larger one was discovered in the



47

mostly destroyed tomb of an adult. The smaller palette has a much finer finish. It was located in a rich, partially destroyed burial of a woman. Placed near the hands of the body, it was accompanied by two small pebbles used as grinders, and covered some fragments of malachite, used as a pigment. Make-up tablets are known from Neolithic and protohistoric Nubian burials. Examples of metamorphic rock, dating to the fifth millennium BC, have been found at Kadruka, not far from Kerma (Reinold 2000a). The quartzite examples appear to be more recent and are found in the A-Group graves of Lower Nubia (Nordström 1972, 120). Occasionally *Kerma Ancien* graves contain palettes, but these become increasingly rare in this later period (Bonnet 1990a, 200). MH

#### 48 Combs

Fine ferruginous sandstone

Kerma, Eastern Cemetery, Grave 1

Pre-Kerma

L 48 mm, W 34 mm, Th 5 mm

L 51 mm, W 39 mm, Th 5 mm

SNM 31130, 31131

These two combs of fine ferruginous sandstone come from the same female burial. They are potters' tools used to smooth and decorate ceramics. The two examples have similar dimensions. They are flat, carefully polished and their trapezoidal shape is very regular. The larger extremity on each is bevelled. One of the two tools is equipped with small incisions regularly spaced, on the bevelled part. They were intended for

impressing dotted motifs on the pots while the clay was still soft, hence the 'comb' appellation of this type of tool. The other comb is without teeth and must have been used to smooth the surface as well as to impress longitudinal motifs. On one side this tool has been partially perforated, perhaps to make a hole to tie a string to the object, or for some other unknown purpose.

Potters' tools are commonly found in the Kerma civilization (Bonnet 1990a, 155–6). It is probable that the manufacture of pottery was valued within society, considering the beauty of some vases. It is therefore not surprising that this activity has been marked by some objects included in funerary contexts – the time of the dead person's journey to the afterlife. MH



48

**49 Dish**

Quartzite

Kerma, Eastern Cemetery, Grave 1

Pre-Kerma

L 165 mm, W 159 mm, Th 16 mm

SNM 31262

This dish is made of grey quartzite with a very noticeable grain. Finely polished, its shape is oval and slightly concave. This object, found in a female grave, was accompanied by rich grave goods: palette, grinders, ivory cup, combs, flints and copper-alloy objects. Its function is not clear. It may simply be a dish, intended for food, unless its use is related to that of a palette and therefore was used for grinding or pounding. Such objects have also been found in A-Group graves (Nordström 1972, 121). MH



49

**50 Jar**

Pottery

Kerma, Eastern Cemetery, Pit 35

Pre-Kerma

H 397 mm, max. D 385 mm; rim: Th 28 mm

SNM 31140

A sub-spherical jar with a narrowed base, its surface is not polished, but has been coarsely smoothed with the aid of a tool that has left slight striation marks. Its colour tends towards dark grey on its interior and around the rim, while it is beige on the rest of the exterior. These differences in colour are a result of the type of firing: the jar will have been placed upside down in an open-air fire. The decoration, restricted to the rim, is composed of parallel incisions, occasionally arranged in a chevron pattern. Of the 285 excavated pits in the Pre-Kerma settlement, only two contained jars. These will have been used for food storage, probably of cereals. The jar presented here was found upside down, with the opening to the bottom of the pit. This position indicates that it was probably not in use at the time the place was abandoned. This type of jar has parallels among the A-Group pottery assemblage (Nordström 1972, pl. 182). MH



50



### 51 Beaker

Ceramic  
Sai Island, Site 8-B-52.A  
Pre-Kerma  
H 111 mm, D 95 mm  
SNM 31312

Complete pre-Kerma pottery vessels are not common. This small beaker is the only one that has been found thus far in the storage pits that are currently excavated on Sai Island. Nevertheless, being cone-shaped, undecorated and of rough workmanship, it is not really representative of the wares recovered from the site. It lay upside down at the bottom of Pit 64 where, except for large fragments of another vessel, no other remains of

the original pit contents were preserved. It may have been used as a measure in the neighbouring granaries. FG

### 52 Plant material

Sai Island, Site 8-B-52.A, Pit 50  
Pre-Kerma  
SNM 31313

This botanical material was found in Pit 50 of the Pre-Kerma storage area excavated on Sai Island. It shows the quality of preservation of the plants that were stored there some five thousand years ago. It includes chaff, stalk and grains from various species that have still to be identified. Samples from other pits analysed previously included grains and fruit stones of at least seventeen different species, particularly emmer wheat (*Triticum dicoccon*) and barley (*Hordeum vulgare*). FG

Geus 1998, 94–5, fig. 7, pl. V, b; 2000, 127; 2003, 165–7

### 53 Dried Gerbil

Sai Island, Site 8-B-52.A  
Pre-Kerma  
L 190 mm, W 80 mm, Th 20 mm  
SNM 31314

Granaries attract small rodents. This was obviously the case for the Pre-Kerma storage pits of Sai Island where their remains, including this one that was naturally mummified,

have been found in quantity. It seems that once they entered the pits, they got trapped and died because of the nature of the ground: a highly carbonated sediment that they were unable to dig through. This is confirmed by burrows of 50–100 mm in length that have been found at floor level in several of the storage pits. FG

### 54 Sealing

Mud  
Sai Island, Site 8-B-52.A  
Pre-Kerma  
L 70 mm, W 40 mm, Th 20 mm  
SNM 31315

The Pre-Kerma storage pits of Sai Island have yielded large mud seals displaying different types of designs. This knot-shaped one, which is deeply impressed and particularly well preserved, is evocative of some hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt. The occurrence of such sealings and the meticulous cleaning of the empty pits for further use which has been observed on the site show that the storage area, which was of great capacity, was under careful management. FG



52, 53



54