

K E R M A

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SOUDAN

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Cover figure : Wadi el'Arab, excavations in 2010. Photo: Philippe Marti.

We continue this year our program which started two years ago. It consists in systematically excavating the most ancient part of the eastern cemetery in order to understand its spatial organisation (sex, age, rich and poor graves, etc.) and to establish the conditions for the emergence of the Kerma civilisation. It is well known that the beginning of this civilisation is characterised by the co-existence of two pottery traditions: the first typical of Ancient Kerma and the second evocating the C Group style (Privati 1982). We made the same observation in the eastern part of the excavated surface (see figure 9), but in the western part, the pottery was different. The sherds found belong only to the Ancient C Group tradition (phase Ia) without any features of the Ancient Kerma style. Moreover, this pottery is thinner and its decoration more elaborate than that of the eastern part. There is clearly an opposition of styles between the two parts of the excavated area. However it is difficult to find other features in the funerary ritual which can give sense to this observation. In the eastern part, the pits are approximately circular (figure 6), whilst in the western part the funerary pits are more elongated, almost rectangular. To date we do not understand the significance of this difference. Another interesting point

Figure 6 | Eastern cemetery. View of ancient Kerma grave pits (sectors 27/28) excavated during the current season.

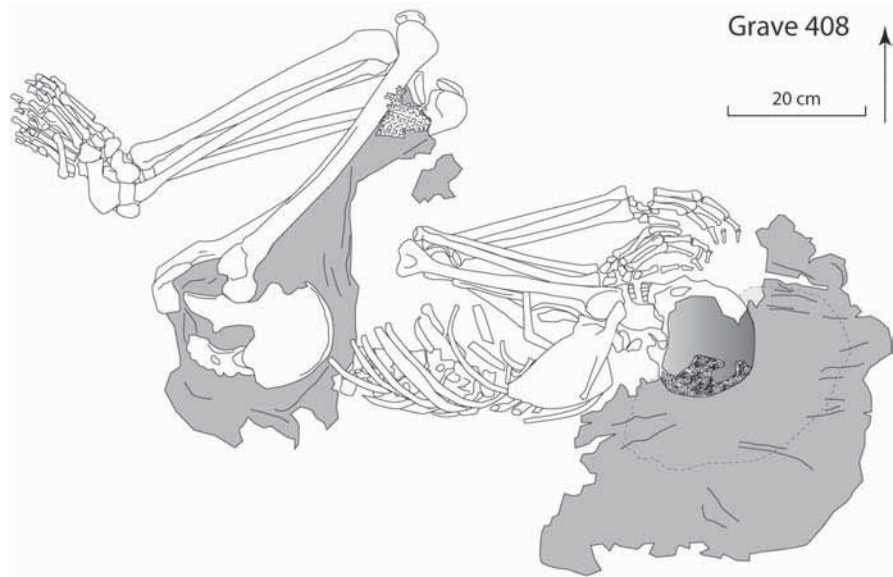


is the presence of funerary stelae placed vertically all around the tumuli (figure 7, Honegger and Bonnet 2010, pp. 7-9). This kind of tumulus, typical of C Group, can be found in the eastern part as well as in the western one. It is difficult to contend that they are more numerous in the western part, because in this direction the surface is more eroded and the stelae, as the tumuli, tends to completely disappear. Inside the pits the inhumations are always in the same position, typical of the Kerma civilisation: the body is placed on the right side in a flexed position with the head in the direction of the east (figure 8). In conclusion, other than the opposition of pottery styles, there is still a lack of data to contend that this opposition is due to the presence of two different populations with different traditions. A systematic comparison of bio-anthropological features of the inhumations is in process and will probably gives interesting data about the homogeneity or not of the first people of Kerma (see Fallet in this volume). In this perspective, some analyses on ancient DNA were conducted under the supervision of Dr. Alex de Voogt (American Museum of Natural History) on samples carefully taken from seven graves, but the results are unsatisfactory because the dryness of the climate contributes towards the destruction of the DNA.

Figure 7 | Eastern cemetery. Stealae coming from C Group tumuli discovered at the periphery of plundered graves.



Figure 8 | Eastern cemetery.
Vectorial drawing of the inhumated in grave 408. The body was wrapped by a mat and a cattle skin, with its head placed on a plant pillow.



Another important challenge is to date the beginning of the Kerma civilisation. Even if this civilisation is famous and has been studied for over 100 years, its detailed chronology is still imperfectly understood. The first classification of pottery from the cemetery of Saï island made by Brigitte Gratien, gives a general partition in phases with dates based on the Egyptian imports (Gratien 1978). Since this first attempt, a more detailed classification of the pottery was proposed on the basis of the data coming from the eastern cemetery (Privati 1999) and a new evaluation of the Egyptian imports was made (Bourriau 2004). For Ancient Kerma the dates proposed by the imports are not precise enough, and gives only a large chronological interval comprised between the 5th and the 11th dynasty. Over many years Charles Bonnet has C14 dated the graves excavated to improve the absolute chronology of this civilisation. The analyses were based on organic material such as bones or cattle skin accompanying the burial, but this material appears to be difficult to treat by the laboratories and has not given reliable results.

In this context we initiate a programme of C14 dating of the chronology in the eastern cemetery and especially that of Ancient Kerma. If the new dates made on cattle skin today give better results due to a close collaboration with the laboratory responsible of the analysis (Laboratory of Ion Beam Physics, Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich), we have sought other material – particularly ostrich eggshell which has always given good results for other prehistoric sites– with a precise association between the sample and the event we want to date.

To date we have obtained four reliable C14 dates from graves of the Ancient Kerma area (figure 9). These first results indicate a chronological partition between the western part dated 2600-2400 BC, and the eastern part, two hundred years more recent. This appears to indicate that the first stage in the development of the eastern cemetery began with a tradition of Ancient C Group (phase Ia, Bietak 1968). This

C14 chronology of the third millenium in the Kerma area

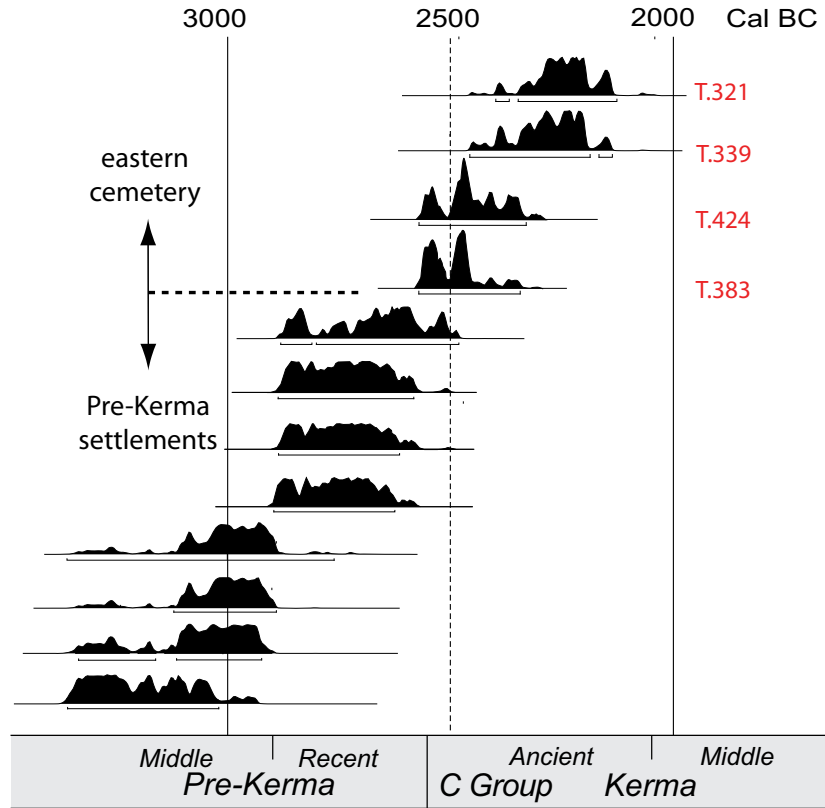


Figure 9 | Eastern cemetery. Top: C14 chronology of the third millennium BC including Pre-Kerma and Kerma periods. The dates, 2 sigma calibrated, show a continuity of occupation between 3200 BC and the beginning of the civilisation of Kerma. The starting point of the eastern cemetery is 2600-2400 BC. Lower: plan of the Ancient Kerma sectors excavated these last years. The four available C14 dates tend to distinguish two areas. The oldest is marked by the presence of pottery of Ancient C Group whereas the second phase is characterised by the traditional Ancient Kerma I.

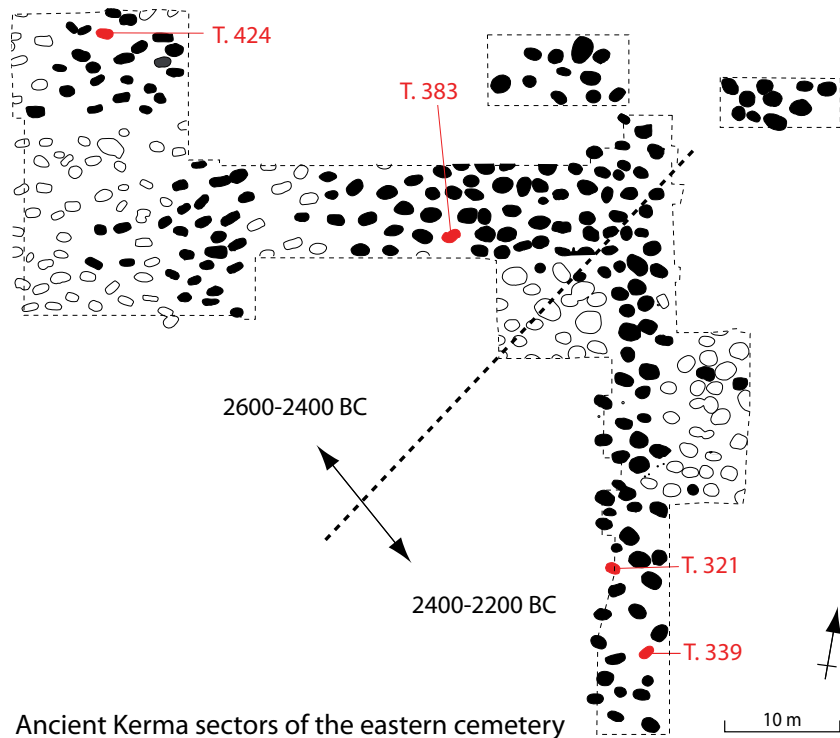




Figure 10 | Eastern cemetery. Bowl found in the infill of an Ancient Kerma grave. The decoration is original and evokes the influence of C Group, but this pottery style does not belong to the Ancient C Group phase Ia. It is probably a more recent kind of local adaptation.

Figure 11 | Small agate pendent with a representation of a person engraved on its surface.



initial tradition would evolve into less elaborate models in association with the Ancient Kerma tradition (phase I, Privati 1999). This hypothesis, which needs to be confirmed by further analyses, will profoundly alter our understanding of the origin of Kerma and C Group groups, the latter being usually restricted to Lower Nubia. It is not impossible that the origin of the C Group is located somewhere in Upper Nubia and that this group occupied Lower Nubia in a second stage.

During the 2010-2011 campaign we excavated 52 graves, a large number of which had been plundered to varying degrees. Only ten were intact and the tumuli were still in place for five graves. They were marked by pots placed around the periphery of the tumuli on their eastern or northern sides. The graves were relatively poor, except for pottery sherds found in the infill (figure 10). Few objects were discovered with the inhumations: some beads, two small pots and a stone pendent (figure 11). A seal was also placed in a tumulus as well as a horn of a young bovid in the filling of two graves. One of the most interesting graves (figure 8) contained many organic remains, such as a mat disposed on the body, a thin piece of leather covering the head, another one the legs, and a relative large plant pillow placed under the head. This year, we began building a wall on the western side of the cemetery, which is most in danger due to the proximity of cultivated fields and the density of vehicle traffic. A relatively high bank was built along the fields to delimit the extension of the cultivated area and to protect the road from water damage the eastern and northern side of the cemetery. At the same time, Marc Bundi supervised the building of a wall 1500 metres long from the south-west angle of the cemetery towards the north (figure 12 and 13). In the corner, a visitors parking lot was established and a panel set up, explaining that it is forbidden to enter the site with the car.



Figure 12 and 13 | Eastern cemetery. Building of a low wall in galous of the western limit of the cemetery in order to protect it.

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