# K E R M A

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SOUDAN

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I M P R E S S U M **Université de Neuchâtel**
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Cover figure : figurine of a giraffe found in the Kerma cemetery during the 2009-2010 season. Dimensions : 6x4x2 cm. Photography : Philippe Marti.



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In the middle of the eastern cemetery, we halted the excavation of the Pre-Kerma agglomeration in its western direction because the surface cleaning became problematic due to the density of artefacts and structures connected with the Middle Kerma graves. It was too difficult to reach the Pre-Kerma surface without damaging the more recent remains. Moreover, the structures identified last year (Honegger and Bonnet 2009) were not all dated to the Pre-Kerma Period; the radiocarbon dating of the fill of two pits gave results around 2000 BC, one millennium later than the Pre-Kerma agglomeration. Before publishing the final results of this long excavation (begun December 1994), it will be necessary to explore one more time the stratigraphic cross-sections of the main fortifications identified in the north to understand the building process (Honegger 2007).

In the most ancient sector of the Kerma cemetery, we continued to explore sectors CE27 and CE28 in order to clarify the spatial distribution of the graves and to understand the beginnings of the Kerma civilisation, which is characterised by the coexistence of the ancient C-Group of Lower Nubia and ancient Kerma traditions (figure 5). In sector CE27 where 60 graves were excavated last year and in 1998-1999, 27 new graves were cleared. Many of them were plundered, most likely in recent times following Reisner's excavations. The majority of the graves were despoiled in modern times; however, unlike the pillage that occurred in antiquity, it was not limited to the part of the burial where grave goods were concentrated (specifically the head). In fact, it affected the whole body, disturbing and destroying a large part of the grave. This phenomenon is noted predominantly in the western part (CE28) where the erosion is the most active. There, the graves are closer to the surface and more accessible. In the eastern part (CE27) where a thick layer of sand has protected the graves and the tumuli, modern plundering is absent and only a few graves were pillaged in antiquity. This probably occurred a short time after the funerary ceremony by those who knew exactly where to find burial goods.

The state of preservation of the eastern part of the excavation is particularly good, especially in the area opened this winter (figure 5) and led to the discovery of four well preserved tumuli (figure 6 and 7). Three of them are composed of mud, black stone and white gravel, whereas the fourth, of C-Group tradition, is made of mud, white gravel at the top and stelae arranged around the tumulus. Of small dimensions, the latter must belong to a child. Thirty years ago, Charles Bonnet discovered not far away – in sector 1, more to the north – the same type of tumuli, including a small one of C-Group tradition (Bonnet 1982). On the surface, complete pots were still preserved upside down on the northern edge of the tumuli, but in most cases, the pillagers broke the vases and only sherds were found. In the new area where the tumuli are still preserved, a clay figurine of a giraffe was discovered in the sand during the excavation (see cover image).

Figure 6 | View of three ancient Kerma tumuli built with mud and stones with deposits of pottery on the northern edge.

Figure 7 | View of a small tumulus of C-Group tradition with stelae arranged around the perimeter.

Usually the most common animal figurine found in Kerma represents a bovine (Ferrero 1984), but in this case the lump on the top of the head between the ears is characteristic for the determination of the animal even if the neck is not so long for a giraffe. The punctuated decoration on the sides may represent the typical markings of this animal. Like other figurines found in the cemetery, the break at its base indicates that it belonged to an offering palette. The giraffe is known later in Kerma civilisation, particularly on the wall of the chapel of KXI dated to the Classic Kerma and as inlaid decorations on a funerary wooden bed of the same period (Bonnet & al. 2000). This animal seems to have a mythological significance and it is possible that it begins during the ancient Kerma period with this example.

The interrelation between C-Group and Kerma traditions is still difficult to understand. In sectors 27 and 1, the finds are mainly of ancient Kerma tradition, but fine C-Group black pottery is also present (Privati 1982). In some cases, the typical C-Group tumuli with stelae are present as well. In contrast, sector 28 is completely dominated by C-Group pottery (figure 8) and even if the tumuli have disappeared in this eroded area, the shape of the burial pits is more rectangular than rounded graves of the sector 27. It is now difficult to understand whether the C-Group tradition corresponds to a distinct ethnic population or if it is merely associated with a particular social strata within a larger population. One of the aims of the anthropological approach is to answer this question (cf. *infra* C. Fallet). In all cases the dichotomy between the two areas represents an opportunity to clarify the composition of the Kerma civilisation.

Figure 8 | Sample of ancient C-Group sherds found in the sector CE28 of the eastern cemetery.

Only a few of the tombs excavated were still intact, but they did not contain many grave goods. However, one of these were particularly interesting because of the many luxuries it contained: stone and copper beads, stone bracelets and bone rings (figure 9). In one case, an ancient Kerma grave was plundered near the head of the deceased and then reused for another burial. The new grave, some 50 cm above the first burial, included reused stelae taken from C-Group tumuli and installed against the walls of the pit, before it was covered by earth (figure 10). This atypical grave probably dates to the Kerma period as the body is placed in the position common for this time and the installation of such stones inside the pit is better known further south, in the Fourth Cataract area. Lastly, we want to mention an unusual discovery in a cemetery: a small shallow pit that contained a single bone, a femur carefully wrapped with pieces of leather that form three successive layers (figure 11). The bone belongs to an immature individual and is entirely covered with cut marks (butchery marks?) accompanied by some larger impacts. Without a more detailed analysis of these marks it is difficult to interpret this unique find. Nevertheless it is possible that it is linked with the presence of other traumas observed on some skeletal remains, traumas that resulted in non natural death (cf. *infra* C. Fallet).

Figure 9 | Copper beads, necklaces, bracelets and bone rings found in an ancient Kerma grave.

Figure 10 | View of a reused ancient Kerma grave with a body surrounded by stelae taken from C-Group tumuli.

Figure 11 | Small grave containing a single bone: a femur carefully wrapped in pieces of leather.

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## FIGURES

| | |
|---|---|
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| Bastien Jakob | Figures 2, 10 |
| Camille Fallet | Figures 11, 12, 14, 15 |
| Philippe Marti | Figures 5, 8, 9, 13, 16, 17, 26, 27 |
| Team of Charles Bonnet | Figures 18, 19, 21 |
| Philippe Ruffieux | Figure 23 |
| Jean-Michel Yoyotte | Figure 24 |

SUMMARY




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