

SUDAN

ANCIENT
TREASURES



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EL-BARGA

MATTHIEU HONEGGER

In the Nile Valley the Mesolithic period corresponds to the last hunter-gatherer societies (c. 8500–5500 BC).¹ The communities of that time did not yet practise agriculture and do not seem to have possessed domesticated animals; however, they did make pottery² and used querns to grind the wild grains that they gathered. Subsistence was generally orientated towards the exploitation of the Nile (molluscs, fish and other aquatic animals), but hunting terrestrial mammals and the collection of plants may have also played an important role. Mesolithic sites often yield a high density of artefacts and are frequently accompanied by a few burials. These remains argue for a certain degree of sedentariness, even if we have to envisage that members of the group moved seasonally to carry out certain activities (such as fishing and hunting).

It is from the central Sudan that the Mesolithic period of the Nile Valley is best known, beginning with the work of A.J. Arkell in the 1940s.³ Several excavations carried out in the Khartoum area, around Shendi and in the Butana, allow for the reconstruction of the *modus vivendi* of the time with some precision.⁴ Further north research is less advanced and, despite the presence of several sites, it is only at the latitude of the Second Cataract, in the Western Desert, that more in-depth

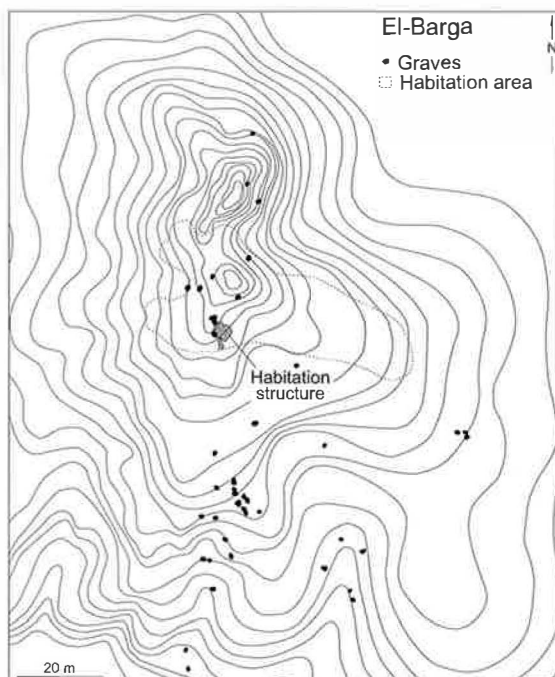
studies have been carried out.⁵ Along the Nile in Egypt, information on the Mesolithic is almost non-existent.

In the area around Kerma, the recent excavation of a Mesolithic settlement has provided new information on this little-known period in Upper Nubia. A survey conducted in 2001 led to the discovery of several settlements and cemeteries. One of these, threatened with destruction, has been the object of excavation for two years. Called el-Barga, this site is located on an elevation formed by a rise of the rocky substratum, at a little less than 15 km from the Nile.⁶ It consists of a habitation area and of several dozen burials divided into two sectors: one to the north, the other to the south (fig. 10).

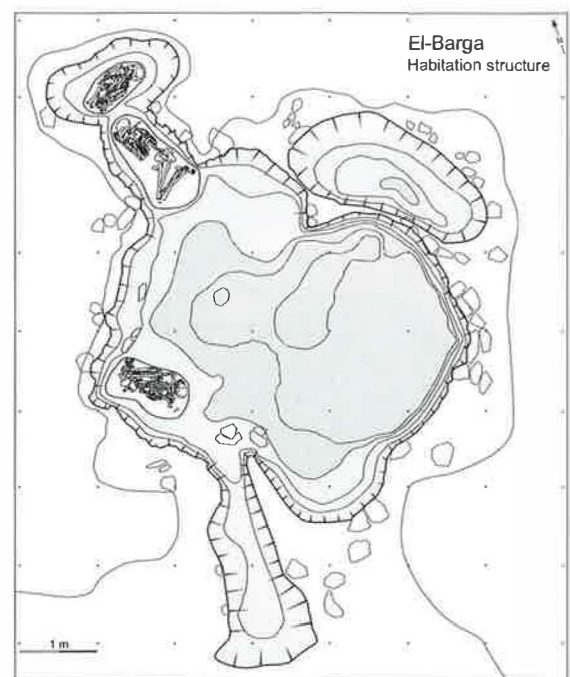
The northern sector is the oldest; it dates to c. 7500–7000 BC and contains traces of a settlement, as well as eleven burials. The remains of domestic activities are represented by an abundant microlithic industry, animal bones, of which the majority are of fish, shells, querns and grinders, some ostrich eggshell beads and a few bone tools including a double-pointed harpoon.

The clearing of an area of more than 200 m² has allowed us to find the floor of a hut dug into the sandstone substratum. It is a sub-circular cavity a little less than 5 m in diameter, whose depth is over 500 mm. To the south a nearby depression can be made out; located

10 Site plan of el-Barga, located on a hill by the alluvial plain. To the north is the Mesolithic settlement with burials, and to the south is a second more recent burial area. Contours at 100 mm intervals.



11 Plan of a dwelling with three inhumed individuals inside or nearby. Contours at 100 mm intervals.





on the side opposite to the direction of the prevailing winds, it probably corresponds to the entrance of the hut. The dwelling was probably covered by a conical roof made of an armature in wood directly anchored on the edge of the pit, somewhat like the huts at Nabta Playa in the Egyptian desert.⁷

Three male burials were associated with the hut. One was set in the interior, while the other two were located around the edge (fig. 11). There are another eight inhumations in the northern sector. The majority are of adult men, of a notable size and robust build. The bodies were generally placed in a pit and were not accompanied by grave goods, with the exception of one grave that contained a shell. Three burials present an unusual situation: the bones of the legs and sometimes those of the arms seem to have been dislocated, as if the bodies had been forced into a small space, probably a sack (figs 12, 13).

The graves of the southern sector are later in date, c. 6000 bc, a time that may correspond to the beginning of the Neolithic in the area. Some thirty inhumations have been excavated (fig. 15), containing mostly women and children. The grave goods are fairly abundant, generally consisting of shells, necklaces of ostrich eggshell beads (cat. 19) and bracelets of hippopotamus ivory (fig. 14, cat. 18). Stone beads and ceramics are rare. The pots discovered in the tombs are generally complete. They sometimes have a flat bottom and their surface can be decorated entirely. The most surprising objects come from the adult burials. These are flat stones, partially polished, that appear to be the prototypes of cosmetic tablets (cat. 17). In two burials they were accompanied by small stone rubbers. Cosmetic tablets are common in the Neolithic and protohistoric burials where they can be highly sophisticated. In comparison, the examples of el-Barga are still rustic, but are some of the oldest found in the Nile Valley.

The other category of funerary goods discovered in the adult burials is a series of stone lip plugs (cat. 16). These have been consistently found in the vicinity of the mouths of the individuals, which confirms that they were inserted in their upper or lower lips. The lip plugs are particularly rare in Egyptian prehistory and protohistory. On the other hand, they occur more commonly in Sudan, notably in late contexts, from the last millennium bc onwards. They are still used today by some African populations.⁸ The examples from el-Barga represent, as far as we know, the earliest examples from north-east Africa.

12, 13 Graves of males, discovered in or near the settlement in the northern sector. The individuals were placed inside a leather sack which has now vanished. The unusual position of some of the arms and legs is the result of the bodies having been buried in forced positions.



14 Grave in the southern sector containing a child of approximately six years of age, accompanied by two bracelets of hippopotamus ivory.

15 Field season 2004. Excavating graves in the southern sector.



- 1 The proposed dates are approximate. They can vary according to the region under consideration and still depend on ongoing research.
- 2 Cf. Mohamed-Ali and Khabir 2003.
- 3 The excavation of a site in the city of Khartoum in 1944–5 revealed the existence of the Mesolithic horizon called 'Early Khartoum'. This is characterized by the presence of pottery and by an economy orientated towards the exploitation of water resources (Arkell 1949a).
- 4 Cf. Caneva *et al.* 1993; Haaland and Magid 1995.
- 5 Notably at Nabta Playa (Wendorf and Schild 2001).
- 6 Honegger 2003, 284–90.
- 7 These huts are globally dated between 7000 and 6000 bc (Wendorf and Schild 2001).
- 8 Cf. Fischer 1998.

16 Lip plugs

Ivory, carnelian, amazonite, mesolite

El-Barga, southern sector, Graves 9, 12, 14, 22, 26

Mesolithic or early Neolithic

a L 11 mm, D 3–7 mm, amazonite

b L 10.5 mm, D 1.5–3 mm, amazonite

c L 24 mm, D 1–3 mm, ivory

d L 14 mm, D 1.5–4 mm, carnelian

e L 9 mm, D 1.5–5 mm, mesolite

SNM 31136a–e respectively

Five small bilobed objects were found in the graves of adults near the mouths of the individuals. They are lip plugs that were inserted in a perforation made at the level of the lower or upper lip. They have been carefully made of



16a–e, clockwise from top left

different coloured stones, or in ivory in the case of the longest example. Lip plugs are particularly rare in Egyptian pre- and proto-history, although some have been found in a Badarian context (Hendrickx *et al.* 2001, 87–8). They are more commonly found in the Sudan, especially in contexts of the last millennium BC. At Jebel Moya several lip plugs were discovered, especially in female burials (Gerharz 1994, 89–92). They were attached to the lips or nostril of the individuals. Today people in East Africa still use this type of ornament (Fischer 1998). MH

17 Palette and grinder

Stone

El-Barga, southern sector, Grave 8

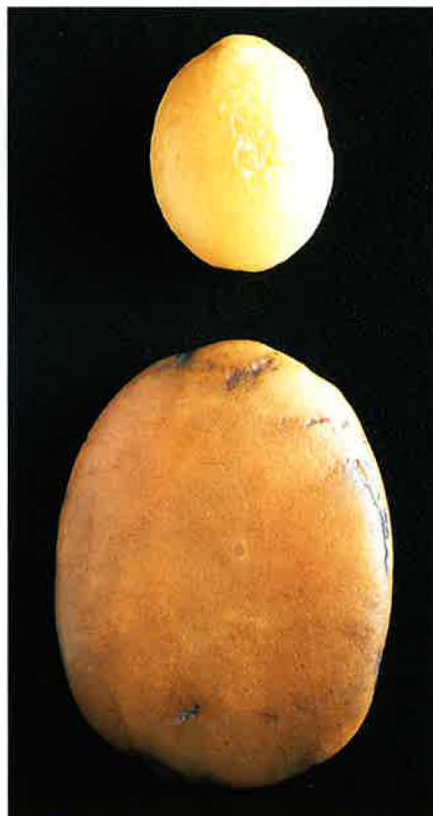
Mesolithic or early Neolithic

L 72 mm, W 54 mm, Th 5 mm

L 28 mm, W 38 mm, Th 20 mm

SNM 31139A–B respectively

Some of the adult graves of el-Barga have yielded partially polished flat pebbles with slightly concave centres. These correspond to the prototypes of make-up palettes, a similar example having been discovered in a domestic context with traces of haematite. Sometimes the palettes are found together with small spherical grinders. Their extremities



17

often show traces of polishing or percussion similar to the finish found on more recent examples such as Pre-Kerma palettes (cat. 47). Make-up palettes, which can attain a high degree of sophistication, are common in Neolithic and protohistoric graves (Reinold 2000a, 58, 64; Nordström 1972, pl. 54). In comparison, the examples of el-Barga, which are usually placed near the stomach of the bodies or by their sides, are still rustic, but are some of the oldest examples found in the Nile Valley. MH



18

18 Bracelets

Ivory

El-Barga, southern sector, Graves 18 and 22

Mesolithic or early Neolithic

L 65 mm, W 58 mm, Th 12 mm

L 62 mm, W 61 mm, Th c. 12 mm

SNM 31128A–B respectively

The two bracelets presented here are of hippopotamus ivory; their dimensions and other characteristics are similar. Relatively thick, one of their facets still presents the surface of the original canine, which is of an impressive size, and must have belonged to a very large hippopotamus. The bracelets have been made from the tooth cut longitudinally rather than being cut as a cross section. They were then perforated and partially polished. This type of bracelet is found both in adult and infant graves. These thick examples were found by the wrists of the skeleton, but the finer pieces could also be worn at the biceps. Ivory bracelets are common in burials along the Nile Valley. Amongst others, they have been found in the Neolithic graves at Kadruka (Reinold 2000a, 79), in Neolithic or Predynastic burials in Upper Egypt (Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928), in A-Group contexts (Nordström 1972, 127) and at Kerma (Bonnet 1990a, 180). MH

19 Beads

Ostrich eggshell

El-Barga, southern sector, Grave 9

Mesolithic or early Neolithic

4 strands: L approx. 400 mm; bead: D 5 mm,

Th 1.5 mm

SNM 31129

●strich eggshell beads are found fairly frequently among Mesolithic or early Neolithic grave goods. This assemblage, made up of nearly one thousand beads, was found in a female grave near the head. It seems that it was not a necklace, but a type of hairnet. In one infant burial of the same period, a string of ostrich eggshell beads was tied around the waist. In Nubian pre- and protohistory these beads are consistently found. Some examples have been discovered in the Mesolithic dwelling in the northern sector of el-Barga (7500–7000 BC). Some are finished while others are in the process of manufacture, with unpolished edges, or without the perforation made with the aid of a piercing tool. Beads of this type are also known in Neolithic and A-Group contexts, as well as in a Kerma context (Nordström 1972, 124). MH

