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Abka Again

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1. *General Note*

ON other pages of this issue, Dott. Arturo Palma di Cesnola discusses as fully as he can *in vacuo* (so to speak) the stone implements from the Abka sites. At the same time we are able to give some C_{14} dates kindly supplied by Professor James B. Griffin and Professor E. R. Crane, both of the University of Michigan.

There now exists all the necessary data for a full discussion of the most interesting and important rock-drawing sites of Abka, some notes on which were published in Kush vi. However, the opportunity to connect all the threads seems as far off as ever—indeed further, for at the time when my contract ended with Gordon University College (on whose account the excavations were done) and its renewal for a further three months was refused, a firm offer to print the results in two volumes had been received, all the plates and plans were ready and the work of preparation for the press was very largely complete. Now all that part of the book is in store in England, the objects are in Khartoum, I am in Tripoli and Dott. Palma di Cesnola is in Florence. This state of affairs is much to be regretted. Nevertheless, I personally feel that it is something to be grateful for that we can at least publish the stonework and the dating, even though there can be no perfect collation between them or with most of the rock-drawings and the pottery.

It is perhaps worth summarizing, very briefly indeed, what was found at Abka in order to help, as far as is possible, to place the two specialist reports in some framework.

The area in which the search was carried out—apart from a brief sortie into the sandstone desert by Wadi Halfa with which we need not concern ourselves here—lies between the village of Abka and the hamlet of al Hani, the former being 20 km. south of Wadi Halfa in the midst of the Second Cataract. The purpose of the research was to find rock-drawing sites associated with the debris of human occupation and to excavate the latter in order to throw further light on the drawings, wherever debris and drawings could be collated. These objects were, in the main, achieved for about three thousand drawings were found in the area examined, spread over about thirty-five sites, dating from Mesolithic to Christian times and almost all apparently with associated remains. (There are also a few modern drawings, mostly ithyphallic and said to be the work of passing lorry-drivers.)

However, under the circumstances described the work of collation has, alas, had to remain incomplete.

Site XXXII, the earliest, was not found till the very end of the 1948 season and could not be excavated until 1957 (see Kush vi). The two next most important sites excavated were V and IX. The importance of the former lay in the fact that it lay right across the line of a Prehistoric High Nile; part of the remains having been deposited in the dry dust above High Nile have lain untouched since, while the rest of the site was used at Low Nile and consequently its remains show signs of heavy rolling. This High Nile was at 13.5 m. above the (outstandingly) High Nile of 1946. This high level clearly lasted for a considerable period for the rocks are all patinated blackish below it, shading down to mauve-blue between the present Niles, and are pale brown above it—that is coloured by normal desert patination. (The mauve is due to manganese in the Nile water.) It is probably not too fanciful to collate this level with the high level Sebilian silts found farther down river. Pollen analysis proved fruitless as it did with modern silt at Khartoum.

Site IX lay in a multiple pothole, the walls of which have been again and again used by artists, who were inhabiting the place in later times, and in all probability fishing in it in earlier times. It is perhaps curious to find that it was inhabited as recently as the 7th century, possibly by Christians fleeing from the Muslim invader. It was also curious to observe that the channels of the Nile, now dried, were so terraced in Christian times (exact dates not established) that the general level seems to have been raised—this might well be intensive work by fleeing Coptic peasants from Egypt, who to this day are much better agriculturalists than the Nubians.

An interesting point made by Palma di Cesnola is the continuity, throughout the period studied, of a rough quartz industry. This is found to survive well into the Christian period in Site IX which confirms the hypothesis put forward in Kush vii that a quartz flake industry existed at Soba.

Among the rock-drawings themselves there was much of interest. The fauna depicted, as was only to be expected, showed much that no longer exists in the area such as elephant, rhinoceros, addax, oryx, gnu, wild bull, giraffe, lion (dynastic in date), ostrich, warthog and others. Among the rarer drawings were a scorpion, a baobab tree, possibly a comet or meteor, the ring trap, and, most interesting of all, a drawing of the kind of fish trap built of stones which is still used in the area (see Kush vi, plates xxxiv–xxxvii). It was curious that although the diet of the inhabitants (at least when at the site) seemed to be mainly fish, there was not a single drawing of a fish in the big gallery of animal presentations discovered.

The, apparently, earliest representations of human beings were found at a site not excavated and were about a metre high each showing people full face, more than one male and almost certainly a female, though the latter was not so certain as the former. Some seemed to wear an extinguisher hat similar to

that made of feathers found nearby in a cemetery (probably of later date) by Bates and Dunham, and published by them in *HAS*, VIII, pls. iv, 3; lvii, fig. 3. There is a variety of human beings portrayed at the different sites and of perhaps unusual interest are men with no head at all or a tiny knob with a feather sticking out. This seems part of the long tradition, including the 'men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders' and the present Tuareg, in which there is some *tabu* on the human head.

The drawings at Site XXXII (and one at a lowish level in IX) were schematic, with the exception of one badly drawn antelope (perhaps an ibex), and it was this fact that led us to believe that the site was Mesolithic and probably in the Spanish tradition (see KUSH VI, PLATES XXXVI–XXXIX). The dating given by Professor Griffin is perfectly consonant with the site being Mesolithic, though as far as a Spanish origin is concerned the absence, at present, of intermediate stations needs explanation.

It is interesting to try to make some comparison with South Africa and Dr A. C. Hoffman has been kind enough to send me some papers on recent work there. According to C_{14} dating, our men were drawing and fishing some two thousand years earlier than the earliest date so far found for the Wilton people in South Africa (A. C. Hoffman, 'New Excavations in the Matjes River Rock Shelter', *SAMAB*, VI, 13) and it is thought that it was these Wilton people who came from North Africa and Southern Europe bringing the art of rock-painting with them (A. J. D. Meiring, 'The Matjes River Shelter; Evidence in Regard to the Introduction of Rock-Painting into South Africa', *Researches of the National Museum*, I, pt. 3).

The next oldest material, dating to around 6300 B.C. ± 400, is that from Site IX, the very bottom of Level 6, and consisted of shell scraped from between the big rocks and crevices. In 1957 no archaeological material was found with this shell. If my memory serves me right (and this is of course most unsatisfactory) a few long flint blades were found in comparable positions in 1948 and nothing else, though it is possible that one or two Khartoum A ('Wavy-Line') sherds were also found in the bottom of the level. My memory is that these sherds were in the upper part of Level 6. Shaheinab material, which is the same as Khartoum B, was dated to 3300 B.C. ± 380, and a gap of 3,000 years is probably too much because the two cultures appear to have run straight into each other at Khartoum. A date intermediate between this of Level 6 and that of Level 5 (which is around 4000 B.C.), seems more likely for Khartoum A culture—5000 B.C.?

With Level 5 dated to 4000 B.C. ± 400 we come into the material laid down when the pothole was no longer submerged at High Niles and deposits are those of habitation. The evidence was clear that there was then considerable rainfall, a state of affairs which continued into Level 4.

The most numerous sherds from this and the following level came from simple bowls, about 60 cm. in diameter, made of sandy Nile-mud ware, with

the surface very crudely combed or perhaps wiped with grass. The colour was variegated from black to fawn. Part of a mortar was found in this level in 1957 (see KUSH VI, PLATE XXXVI, 1). 'Fayum A' was dated to around 4250 B.C. ± 200, so that this level is about the same date but probably a little later, maybe contemporary with the Badarians in Upper Egypt.

It will be seen on reference to the Section/Elevation and PLATE XXXIII, *op. cit.*, that drawings of pythons were buried under the debris of Levels 4 and 5.* These drawings were therefore made prior to 4000 B.C. But these were by no means the earliest drawings on the site if we can judge by patination and wear, and it seems sensible to place them between 4000 and 5000 B.C.

There were some drawings, one certainly and the others probably, of date 7000–7500 B.C. (*op. cit.*, left-top Section/Elevation, and PLATE XXXIV (top), some geometrical figures at the bottom, respectively). Probably next in date were the series, mostly whitened in PLATE XXXIV (top), consisting of (from top-left to bottom-right) stylized human (between two relatively recent giraffes), not easily seen, three right hands, child's figure, club(?), object resembling floating jellyfish, crocodile(?), fish-trap(?), and spiked wheel-trap (not chalked), some more hands, and squiggles to right. It seems probable that these should be attributed to the 6000 B.C. occupation, but it must be emphasized that, though it is exceedingly improbable that they are later, there is no evidence that they are not earlier. There is no evidence at all for an Upper Palaeolithic occupation but, as the human figures and hands were very faint indeed, the possibility cannot be excluded. They *appeared* even older than the 7000–7500 group.

In the same plate three different bands of colour on the rock face can be discerned, though not so clearly as they can in reality. The uppermost shows the rock heavily marked with drawings and hammerings, below that is a less scored darker band the top of which represents the top of the ancient debris which protected the wall and its patina from windborne sand scour for 2,000 years or more. Finally there is a greyer level again which shows where, in the earliest occupation, there was continual waterborne sand scour and below which the Nile seldom dropped. The only rock-drawings in this band are one or two spiked wheel traps and geometrics.

Stratification can give us no further help in dating the rock-drawings, and patina but little. We may well be grateful to have been able to date, even if approximately, any of them.

* At Site V (and also at one other, unexcavated, site) there were horizontal rock surfaces, very heavily hammered, which appeared to be cult sites. In the one at V was a drawing which seemed to point to beliefs later held in Egypt, or to something similar. This showed the sun with rays coming out of it and a snake, probably a cobra, about to swallow it.

I understand that the Abbé Breuil has reported such cult petroglyph sites from South Africa.

Site V appears to have begun in the Khartoum A period, and the 'cult-drawings' appeared to be among the earlier ones, and may therefore be about 5000 B.C.

Returning to the levels and their dating we find that Level 4 is about 2500 B.C., that is about the time of the beginning of the C-Group invasion, but there was no very clear indication of this in the remains. It is true that there was black-topped red pottery with incised decoration at the rim, but unfortunately Professor Reisner published the ordinary pottery of his so-called 'Middle Empire' (a term apparently coined to cover from the VIth to the XVIth Dynasty) so badly that little help is to be obtained there, while none of the Early C-Group sherds found at Armant and dated to the VIth Dynasty (*unpublished*) were discovered at Site IX. There has been another climatic change, for although it is still rainy it is less so, and there is a larger quantity of ostrich egg shell, probably indicating a southward drift of these birds in front of increasing aridity. The gap of 1,500 years between this level and the last is surprising, and there is no evidence on which to base even a guess at its cause.

On the other hand, relatively settled conditions under which people would live in villages may perhaps account for the much greater gap between this level and Levels 3 and 2 which prove to belong to about A.D. 675—surprisingly. This occupation may have belonged to the turbulent times of Muslim raids from Egypt (Monneret de Villard, *Storia della Nubia Cristiana*, pp. 61–70), and this has been mentioned above. It is the greatest pity that the nearby Christian village of Abka—the biggest in the neighbourhood—was not excavated before it was destroyed for *sabakh* as it had quite extensive remains. It would be interesting to compare the material in it with that of the upper levels of IX though of course (the village) may be very much later.

2. *The Dating of Sites XXXII and IX at Abka*

Dr James B. Griffin of the Museum of Anthropology of the University of Michigan reports on three of the shell specimens from the Abka re-excavations of 1958 as follows:

> 'The first of these is our catalogue number M-793 which is modern shell from the middle of a cataract of the Nile River, your original number one, which has been dated at 0 ± 150, in other words, it gives a contemporary date. The second specimen is our number 794, which is your original number two, shell specimen from Site XXXII the Upper Levels, south of Wadi Halfa in the middle of the Second Cataract of the Nile attributed to a Mesolithic level and the date is 9175 ± 400. The third specimen is our number M-795 which is given first priority and is your original number three. It is from the Lower Level of Site 32, and has been given a date of 9450 ± 400'.

The purpose of submitting specimen M-793 was to establish whether shell from the Second Cataract was capable of giving satisfactory results and the answer is clearly that it is. Further, for those not initiated in the system, it

is worth pointing out two other things, the first is that the date given 'no years old' is correct to the year and the second that, nevertheless, the meaning of the ± 150 is to say (slightly simplifying the mathematical interpretation) that it is 'even money' that the shells were built any time between A.D. 1808 and 2108, and that the probability of any other date for them decreases very rapidly as you move farther away from these dates in either direction. This point is much more important than the exactitude of the result. In fact the probable error given has itself a further probable error and it would be absurd to insist on the final digit and more realistic to say that the date of the shells was in all probability any time between A.D. 1800 and 2100.

We can now turn to the other specimens and we can see that they give the following dates for the upper and lower levels of the site:

Upper	..	7617 to 6817 B.C. (7217)
Lower	..	7892 „ 7092 „ (7492)

or in more reasonable figures:

Upper	..	7600 to 6800 B.C. (7200)
Lower	..	7900 „ 7100 „ (7500)

It will be seen at once that whereas the central dates are 300 years apart, the probable errors overlap from 7100 to 7600 or by 500 years and that therefore there is little mathematical evidence that the two levels are really of different date; the probability that they are indeed 300 years apart is of the order of 55 : 45 or, roughly even-money. Professor Griffin says in his report that the lower level is probably earlier. The other evidence is inconclusive. Archaeologically speaking there is nothing to suggest that the site was continuously occupied, or even seasonally occupied for anything like such a period and an occupation of that length can be discounted. A *seasonal* occupation of, say, 100 years is by no means improbable though I think the remains are too slight for this unless occupations were very brief indeed. The possibility of two occupations of different dates cannot be excluded—in fact, Monsieur Vaufrey notes one implement (from the Upper Levels) different from the others and unrolled by the river (see KUSH VI, pp. 142–3).

Another possibility is that the site is homogeneous in date and that, as suggested, *op. cit.*, p. 136, the shell in the upper levels came mainly from the Nile-washed levels. Some intrusive later material might account for its difference in date (in so far as there can be said to be a difference). In this case it would probably be justifiable to plump for a date nearer 7500 than 7000 in so far as there was much less risk of contamination from a later period in the Lower than the Upper Levels. But in our present state of knowledge a quarter of a millennium one way or the other is unimportant and the site is best dated 7000–7500 B.C. This date makes the site, I believe, the earliest dated rock-drawing site in Africa, though I am open to correction as I write without

reference books by me. It also confirms, at least as far as chronology is concerned, the hypothesis that the drawings show affinities with the Mesolithic of Spain rather than with any other known group and were probably made by invaders from there or by a group from a common source, more probably the former. However, if this is the case, how did they reach Abka? There is little evidence to show that the Sahara was crossed at that time though occasionally, perhaps once in a hundred years, fantastic crossings are made when the rains have been good even in its desiccated state of to-day, and it is unlikely to have been as dry then as now. The North African coast and the Nile Valley seems the more probable route, and through much of its length their remains would in all probability be buried under the silt.† What kind of people they were, apart from their implements, drawings, and the fact that they ate shellfish, must remain a speculation.

The question may be asked were they Mesolithic or Neolithic? This question is now an ambiguous one as it can be used in more than one sense. One way in which it is used is chronological, these two cultures being taken as ' sequence periods ', but to use it so in a context where the actual date is known to within 500 years would be absurd, particularly as this sequence means a very different chronology in different parts of the world. Another sense in which it is used to-day is to enquire whether the people were food-gatherers or food-producers; of direct evidence there is little. A quern ground in the surface of a rock on the site (see KUSH VI, PLATE XXXVIII, fourth photo) is inconclusive, as querns are now generally accepted to have been used for grinding wild seeds before the practice of agriculture, or even red ochre. These people, we can be fairly sure, were living largely on shell fish (probably also other fish) with some kind of flour, *when* they were on the islet which formed the site at that time. The third way of asking the question is in its original sense, as to whether the stone implements are of the new stone age or the middle stone age. There were certainly no polished implements but this is no longer an adequate criterion and M. Vaufrey, on the small amount of material available to him, believes them to be Neolithic in the Capsian tradition. See also Prof. Palma di Cesnola's study of the stone implement elsewhere in this issue.

The other results given by Dr Griffin are as follows, with comments in brackets by myself:

M-786, Site XXXII. Burnt clay. Insufficient sample. (This came from hearths at that site.)
M-797. Another sample of the same. As above.
M-798, Site IX, Level 2. Charcoal: dated at 1355 ± 200.
M-799, Site IX, Level 3. Charcoal: dated at 1300 ± 200.
M-800, Site IX, Level 3. Hearth charcoal: dated at 1280 ± 200.

† It is perhaps relevant to mention here that Prof. Santa Olalla has published clear photographs of a pottery of Prehistoric date found in Río d'Oro by him which appears to be identical with that of Khartoum A.

(Levels 2 and 3 were arbitrary divisions of a homogeneous layer so that there is nothing very surprising in the sample from Level 2 being apparently 55 years earlier than one from Level 3 for this is only one quarter of the probable error. It could perhaps have come from an older tree. The agreement between the three specimens is remarkably good and speaks well for the C_{14} technique. The most reliable specimen is M-800 as all the charcoal from this came from one hearth. The date is surprising as we had no clue that these levels were remotely as late as the Christian/Islamic period.)

M-801, Site IX, Level 4. Charcoal: dated at 4500 ± 350.
M-802, Site IX, Level 4. Ostrich egg shell: dated at 4470 ± 300.

(The close correspondence in date of the charcoal and ostrich egg shell is again noteworthy, the dates being in fact the same, and is a useful indicator that the latter material can safely be used.)

M-803, Site IX, Level 5. Shell: dated at 5960 ± 400.
M-804, Site IX, Level 6. Shell: dated at 8260 ± 400.

(The big gaps in date between Levels 3 and 4, 4 and 5, and 5 and 6 are unexpected but not inconsistent with the other evidence; this and other matters are discussed in the general notes.)

Professor Griffin writes: ' Credit for these dates should be given to the University of Michigan Phoenix-Memorial Project No. 6, Radiocarbon Laboratory under the direction of Professor E. R. Crane'.