



The Jebel Mokram Group Pottery: A Pan-Grave- or a Middle Nubian-Related Ceramic Tradition of Eastern Sudan?

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Abstract

The Jebel Mokram Group of Eastern Sudan was defined in the early 1980s based mainly on its ceramic assemblage, other material culture and settlement patterns. The definition has been revised in recent years following renewed fieldwork and C14 dates, but the relationship between the Jebel Mokram Group and Nilotic Nubian cultures remains to be fully understood. This article reviews the relationship between the Jebel Mokram Group and the Pan-Grave horizon primarily based on a comparative analysis of their ceramic assemblages. It is proposed that the Jebel Mokram Group can be regarded as part of the Atbai Ceramic Tradition and a component of the Pan-Grave horizon, while also being a component of what is here called the Middle Nubian ‘super-horizon’. It is further suggested that the Jebel Mokram Group was a node in a socio-cultural network extending across Lower Nubia and Egypt and involving large sectors of the Eastern Desert.

Earlier Studies and Present Interpretation of the Jebel Mokram Group

Jebel Mokram Group ceramic finds were first collected in the Khashm el Girba region by Joel Shiner and labeled as ‘El Hagiz Group’ (Shiner et al. 1971:395–412). The Jebel Mokram Group was properly defined in the early

1980s when the cultural sequence of Eastern Sudan was outlined thanks to the collaborative efforts of the Butana Archaeological Project (BAP) and the Italian Archaeological Mission to the Sudan (Kassala) (IAMSK) (Fattovich et al. 1984:182, Fig. 6) (Fig. 1). The definition was based mainly on the specific features of the ceramic assemblage, but also of the other aspects of the material culture and of its settlement patterns. At that time, a dating to the 2nd millennium BCE was proposed for the Jebel Mokram Group. In the meantime, the label 'Hagiz Group' shifted to a cultural phase following the Jebel Mokram Group itself.

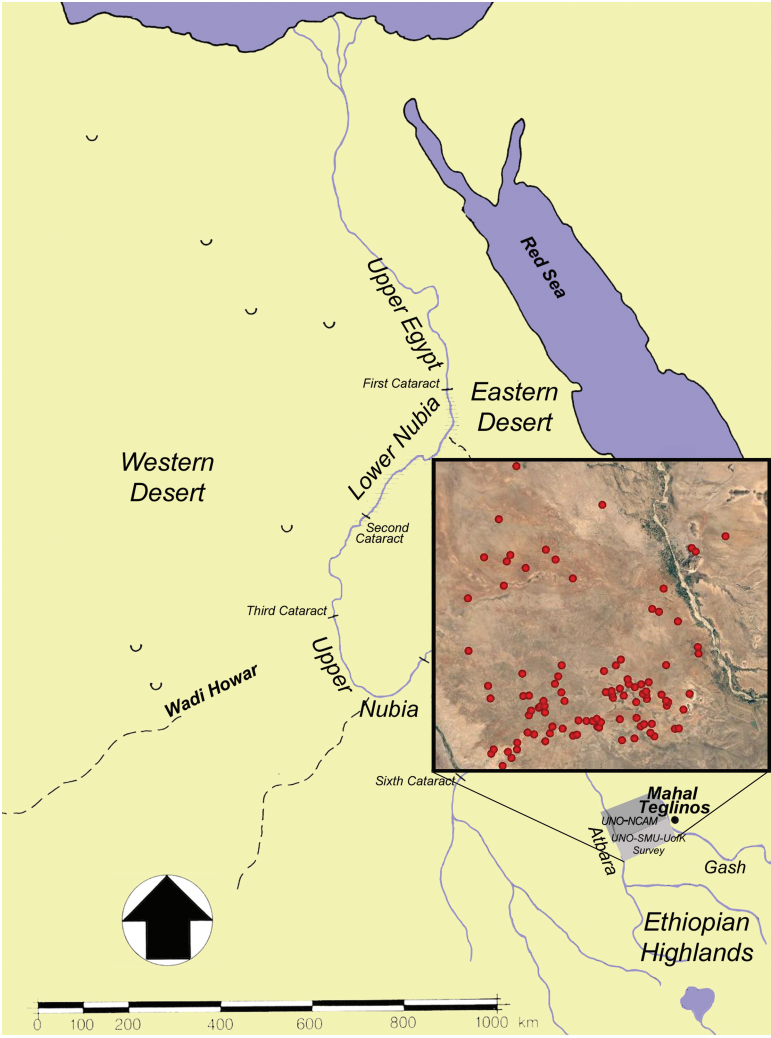


FIGURE 1 Location of the explored area in Eastern Sudan and detail of the recorded Jebel Mokram Group sites.

A crucial contribution on this specific component of the cultural sequence of Eastern Sudan was provided by Karim Sadr, who was interested mainly in the territorial studies and in the general issue of the adoption of nomadic pastoralism in the region, a process in which the Jebel Mokram Group was regarded as an important turning point (see Sadr 1987; 1990; 1991). Sadr also formulated and proposed a typology for the pottery of the Jebel Mokram Group, which remained unpublished,¹ but was summarized in the first article that he devoted to it in *Archéologie du Nil Moyen* (1987). At that time, he noted the similarities with the ceramics of the Pan-Grave culture of Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia and emphasized the discontinuity from the previous Gash Group ceramic production (Sadr 1987:270–274, Fig. 4–5; Sadr 1990:70, see also Fattovich 1989:226; Fattovich 1990:19; Sadr 1991:45–47, 106). In this work, he also confirmed some observations previously proposed by other scholars, who had stressed the similarities between the few scattered sherds collected in Eastern Sudan that had been ascribed to the Jebel Mokram Group, and the Nubian – and especially Pan-Grave – ceramics (Bietak 1968:70). As remarked by Sadr, on the basis of the BAP and the IAMSK finds, the Jebel Mokram Group should certainly be regarded as part of the locally rooted regional ceramic tradition (the *Atbai Ceramic Tradition*, see Fattovich et al. 1984:176; see also Marks & Sadr 1988:80; Sadr 1987:276; Sadr 1990:70). Nevertheless, the Jebel Mokram Group was also recognized as being characterized by distinctive traits and, above all, by similarities with the Pan-Grave (Sadr 1987:270–279).

To explain the links between the Jebel Mokram Group and the Pan-Grave, Sadr drew a parallel between the broad area traditionally inhabited by Beja groups and the large geographic area characterized by Pan-Grave elements, including Lower Nubia, Upper Egypt, and Eastern Sudan. He thus suggested that Eastern Sudan may have been a part of a similar large cultural area during the Jebel Mokram Group times, most likely including several different economic areas (Sadr 1987:281–282). Stressing the discontinuity from the earlier Gash Group in terms of both settlement pattern and ceramic style, Sadr suggested that the Jebel Mokram Group may represent the migration of groups bearing a new culture into the region of Eastern Sudan (Sadr 1987:286–287).

In a second article devoted to the subject, however, Sadr was more cautious in his interpretation of the discontinuity between the Jebel Mokram Group and the previous Gash Group and hypothesized a takeover of the region between

1 A copy of the unpublished typology of the Jebel Mokram Group pottery by Karim Sadr is in the archives of the IAMSK, now kept in the University Museum 'Umberto Scerrato of the University of Naples "L'Orientale". It is being digitized in the framework of a project aimed at the full publication of the IAMSK and BAP materials granted by the Shelby White and Leon Levy Program for archaeological publications.

the Gash and Atbara rivers by the 'Medjay' (i.e. Eastern Desert peoples), as a result of which the local population changed its symbolic system, as suggested by the affirmation of a new ceramic style, and with an apparently more limited movement of people into the region (Sadr 1990:81–82). In the same article, in support of his second interpretation, he stressed that the settlement pattern of the Jebel Mokram Group was characterized not only by differences, but also by continuities with the previous one of the Gash Group (Sadr 1990:74–77; Fattovich et al. 1988–1989:334, 348), and that the subsistence economy in the two phases was always agropastoral, possibly with a greater emphasis on the pastoral component only among the Jebel Mokram Group (Sadr 1990:73–74). In this second interpretation, the differences in subsistence and settlement pattern between Gash Group and Jebel Mokram Group were regarded as related to the environmental changes resulting from the increasing aridity affecting Eastern Sudan and its neighboring regions over the period 3000–1000 BCE (Sadr 1990:77–79). It was also stressed that the main centers and crossroads in the regional network and the role played by the region in long-distance exchange network remained otherwise substantially unchanged from one phase to the other (Sadr 1990:79–80).

To sum up, in both the interpretations proposed by Sadr, the Jebel Mokram Group was seen as the result of dynamics related to the contacts of Eastern Sudan with other regions at a certain point in the 2nd millennium BCE, either related to the migration of groups from the Eastern Desert to Eastern Sudan or not (Sadr 1987; Sadr 1990; Sadr 1991: 47–48; see also Fattovich et al. 1984:182; Fattovich et al. 1988–1989:348).

More recent investigations into the Jebel Mokram Group were conducted in the framework of resumed fieldwork in Eastern Sudan by the Italian Archaeological Expedition to the Eastern Sudan (IAEES).² These included investigations of newly discovered Jebel Mokram Group sites and new excavations in the western sector of the Mahal Teglinos (K1) site, near Kassala (Manzo 2017a; Manzo 2018). On the one hand, the new investigations confirmed the general characteristics of this culture,³ while on the other, thanks to the

2 The expedition is taking place thanks to the University of Naples 'L'Orientale', ISMEO-Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l'Oriente and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the framework of the collaboration with the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums of the Sudan and the Government of the Kassala State.

3 The concept of archaeological culture is adopted here to link different elements of the archaeological record and to extend analysis to a scale larger than a single assemblage or site. Although the identity sense it had for a large part of the last century was widely debated and certainly can no longer be uncritically accepted, I remain convinced that it should be still considered as a crucial heuristic tool (see also Roberts & Vander Linden 2011).

availability of a large number of samples suitable for C14 dating from a reliable stratigraphic sequence in excavation unit K1 v1, it was possible to make a closer assessment of the chronology of the transition from the Gash Group to the Jebel Mokram Group. A significant result of this work is that this transition is now fixed to ca. 1800 BCE, which is approximately 300 years earlier than previously thought (Manzo 2018).

The links seen by Sadr with the Pan-Grave ceramics of Egypt and Nubia were confirmed in an article specifically devoted to study of the transition between the Gash Group and Jebel Mokram Group as it is reflected in the material culture, largely relying on the ceramic collections from excavation unit K1 v1 (Manzo 2017a:100–102). Quantitative analysis of the frequencies of the different classes of pottery in the late Gash Group and Jebel Mokram Group assemblages of the stratigraphic sequence investigated at K1 v1 offered an important tool to describe the transition (Manzo 2017a). It confirmed the quantitative observations made by Karim Sadr on the pottery from the sequence of the much smaller K1 III excavation unit (Sadr 1987:272–273; Sadr 1990:69–71).

The transition is also marked by innovations in the funerary practices, with graves possibly related to the Jebel Mokram Group marked by stone rings reminiscent of the superstructures of some Pan-Grave cemeteries and characterized by tightly contracted bodies (Manzo 2017a:108). Nevertheless, according to more recent investigations, these features may have already made their appearance at the end of the Gash Group (Manzo & Costanzo 2019:268). Certainly, as was pointed out by Karim Sadr (1990:74–77; 1991:58–59), changes are evident in the settlement pattern and especially in the distribution of the sites. During Jebel Mokram Group times, small-sized sites with thin stratigraphic deposit also occur in areas far from the Atbara and the Gash rivers, which may be related to a much more mobile style of life and to an increasingly pastoral-focused adaptive system. In particular, these remarks on the settlement pattern were also confirmed by the data collected in new surveys, conducted in previously unexplored sectors of Eastern Sudan (Zoppi 2018). This is in spite of a fine-grained chronology of the Gash Group settlement pattern, which showed that some of the features of the Jebel Mokram Group settlement pattern may have started emerging at the end of the Gash Group (Giancristofaro & Manzo, in press). By contrast, changes in the lithic industry were apparently more gradual and progressive through the different phases of the Gash Group up to the Jebel Mokram Group (Usai 1997). Therefore, the overall evidence made available by the recent investigations confirms that the transition from the Gash Group to the Jebel Mokram Group is marked by several changes and seems to support the traditional hypothesis that these

have to do with intensified relations with culture(s) foreign to Eastern Sudan, and especially with the Pan-Grave. Moreover, the C14 dates associated with the stratigraphic sequence of excavation unit K1 VI suggest that the transition was quite rapid (see again Manzo 2017a:104).

The Pan-Grave links in the Jebel Mokram Group ceramic production and possibly funerary practices were thought to have emerged through an intensification of relations with groups with Pan-Grave style material culture that, according to more recent studies (see below), may have been peopling regions in the Eastern Desert (Manzo 2017a:106–107). The possible reasons behind this intensification of relations between the Eastern Desert, Eastern Sudan and some sectors of the Nile Valley in Nubia and Egypt, and the resulting emergence of the Pan-Grave and Pan-Grave-related elements across all of these regions have been suggested. A crucial factor, although possibly not the only one, relates to environmental changes, possibly causing droughts and famines, which may have affected the Eastern Desert in the first centuries of the 2nd millennium BCE (de Souza 2019:148–149; Manzo 2017a:109–110). This model also appears to find support in the results of the more recent geoarchaeological investigations in Eastern Sudan, immediately south of the Eastern Desert, showing that the emergence of arid conditions in the region was a progressive process leading to increasingly drier conditions during the early 2nd millennium BCE (Costanzo et al. 2020). Considering the new chronology of the transition from the earlier Gash Group (see above), it is worth noting that the emergence of the Jebel Mokram Group in Eastern Sudan may have occurred at roughly the same time as that of the Pan-Grave in the Nubian and Egyptian Nile Valley. Indeed, all of these dynamics dating ca. 1800 BCE may be related to environmental changes favoring movements of groups from inner areas in the Eastern Desert and/or the change of the routes of the seasonal movements of those groups (Manzo 2017a).

If its relations with the Pan-Grave remain crucial to the debate on the Jebel Mokram Group, it is worth stressing that in the last few years the Pan-Grave material culture itself underwent overall reassessment (de Souza 2019). For the first time, the internal variations in the Pan-Grave ceramic corpus were pointed out and explained in terms of both chronological and regional differences (de Souza 2019:140–153). This resulted in the highly appropriate suggestion that the term ‘horizon’ should be used for the Pan-Grave instead of ‘culture’.⁴

In the meantime, the admittedly scarce but increasing archaeological evidence available for the Eastern Desert seems to support the traditional view that the Pan-Grave horizon may be rooted somewhere in that region

4 In this sense the term horizon is also adopted in this article with reference to the Pan-Grave.

(see e.g. Bietak 1966:64–71; Bietak 1968:149; Sadr 1987; Sadr 1990). This was questioned in the early 1990s precisely on the basis of the apparent absence of Pan-Grave evidence from some sectors of the Eastern Desert region (Sadr et al. 1987:226). On the contrary, the most recent investigations suggest that material culture with Pan-Grave traits may have occurred also in the Eastern Desert, if not possibly originated there (Manzo 2012:80–81; Manzo 2020:80; de Souza 2019:96–97, 151–152). Indeed, the new data emerging from the study of assemblages from sites in the Eastern Desert, although still scant and scattered, have not only completely changed our perception of the peopling of that region in the 2nd millennium BCE, but also provided insights into the relations between a culture of Eastern Sudan like the Jebel Mokram Group and the Pan-Grave of Egypt and Nubia, that may have stemmed from a common origin.

The Jebel Mokram Group and the Debate on the 2nd Millennium BCE Nubian Cultures

In recent years, studies into the Jebel Mokram Group have not only been considerably enriched with new data from Eastern Sudan and the Eastern Desert, but they have also benefitted from additional complexity through ongoing debate surrounding Nubian material culture of the 2nd millennium BCE. This debate is mainly focused on ceramics, including that of the Pan-Grave horizon. The use of the traditional cultural labels for that material culture is being increasingly scrutinized and is emerging as a crucial issue. The long-established use of labels such as C-Group, Kerma and Pan-Grave is coming up against the view that it may be preferable to use the general term ‘Middle Nubian’, considering the broad variation underlying each of these labels and the occurrence of several shared and overlapping traits characterizing the 2nd-millennium BCE Nubian ceramic assemblages. This term is related to the ‘nubische Mittelalter’, first introduced by Steindorff (1935:1, 5–10) with an exclusively chronological meaning, as it was originally used to label a ‘Zeitabschnitt’ (i.e. a time period), including a period of development of a specific culture – the C-Group – and possibly containing sub-phases in it. Later on, the term ‘Middle Nubian’ was resumed, still in the sense of a chronological phase by Trigger (1965:44–45), and it was also used as the title of a volume of the reports of the Scandinavian Joint Expedition to Sudanese Nubia (the ‘SJE’), which continued considering the 2nd millennium ‘Middle Nubian’ cultures as well-defined and separate entities (Säve-Söderbergh 1989:1).

In the field of ceramic studies, the topic of shared and overlapping traits observable in the 2nd millennium BCE Nubian cultures is not new and had

already been pointed out at the time of the last Nubian salvage campaign. A certain hesitation in labelling single finds, assemblages and entire sites is often evident in the reports. For example, cemeteries SJE 35 and 246 are regarded as “separate from the ordinary C-Group and, to judge from the pottery, with some Pangrave influence” (Säve-Söderbergh 1989:162, 228), while Wadi es Sebuwa was regarded as a C-Group settlement with a ceramic assemblage characterized by several Pan-Grave traits (Gratien 1985:54–55). This resulted in articles where the overlapping and shared traits were thoroughly described and their widespread occurrence was mainly, but not exclusively, pointed out in the ceramic assemblages from domestic sites (see e.g. Gratien 2000). Often, the term Middle Nubian is used to label these shared ceramic traits and assemblages, lacking clear evidence allowing for more precise attribution. In the meantime, it may be used to define a very broad cultural ‘*super-horizon*’, including all the Nubian cultures – or horizons – of the first half of the second millennium BCE, as they can be regarded as related, although the way they were related cannot as yet be specified (de Souza 2019:13–15).

In the light of these debated issues, it seems appropriate to place the Jebel Mokram Group ceramics in this new setting. To do so, it will be necessary to go back to the issue of the relations between the Jebel Mokram Group ceramics and the Pan-Grave ceramic horizon, reassessing it also in the broader framework of what is here called the Middle Nubian ‘*super-horizon*’. Therefore, the connections between Jebel Mokram Group and Pan-Grave ceramics will be discussed in the light of the more recent contributions. It will also be assessed if a generic relationship to the Middle Nubian horizon is a more appropriate model for understanding the socio-cultural networks across the region. The classes of the Jebel Mokram Group ceramics and their links with the Nubian traditions will be systematically reconsidered. The possible meaning of the links and connections observed in the material culture traditions will also be discussed. Finally, some remarks on the ongoing debate surrounding the Middle Nubian horizon will also be proposed.

The Jebel Mokram Group Ceramics: Comparative Analysis

The classes⁵ of the Jebel Mokram Group ceramic assemblages were first described and labelled by Karim Sadr (1987:272–273).⁶ In the typology, the

5 ‘Classes’ in this context relates to the most basic classification groups that are characterized by a specific shape, size range, decoration, surface treatment and fabric.

6 The classes were named after toponyms of the region investigated by the BAP and the MAISK.

fabrics are also described but they are not taken into consideration here, with one notable exception being the vegetal/fibre tempered fabric (see below). Indeed, it is highly likely that the fabrics of the Jebel Mokram Group ceramics of Eastern Sudan were different from the ones of the Pan-Grave and in general of the Middle Nubian traditions of Nubia and Egypt, in consideration of the geological differences between these regions, as well as of the fact that locally available clays were certainly used in each region.⁷ Therefore, comparison will be based mainly on the stylistic and morphological attributes.

In the discussion on the relationship between the Jebel Mokram Group pottery and the Atbai Ceramic Tradition, Karim Sadr pointed out that some classes, like the Abu-Gamal Plain (Fig. 2, a, b, c), the Umm Dahan Scraped (Fig. 2, d) and the Eghid Wiped (Fig. 3, a, b) are all rooted in the earlier Gash Group. His observation was based on their frequent incised or impressed rim bands and, in general, on the wiping and scraping characterizing their surfaces and distinctive of the regional Atbai Ceramic Tradition (Sadr 1987:273; see also Capuano et al. 1994:109–10, Fig. 2–4; Winchell 2013:157–158, 170–171). As we know, it was recently suggested that Abu Gamal Plain and Eghid Wiped classes also recall coarser variants of Pan-Grave types (de Souza 2019:91). In these cases, continuity with the local ceramic tradition seems a preferable and more efficient explanation for the origin of these Jebel Mokram Group ceramic classes. In turn, possible similarities with the C-Group and early Kerma pottery were suggested for the Avitola punctate class of the Jebel Mokram Group (de Souza 2019:92) (Fig. 3, c, d), but also in this case the possible continuity with the earlier components of the Atbai Ceramic Tradition and in particular the Butana Group ceramics (Sadr 1987:273) may remain a preferable explanation.

If these elements of continuity with the Atbai Ceramic Tradition can be taken for granted, the Banat Fine, the Kubdai Incised, the Gulsa Groove-carved, the Garatit Complex-impressed, and the Egelit Mat Impressed classes certainly seem characterized by a more marked and clearly distinct exogenous imprint.

The Banat Fine class consists of small thin-walled vessels, slipped and burnished on both surfaces, often black topped. Rims are both direct and thickened, always banded, i.e. clearly separated from the rest of the vessel (Fig. 3, e, f). Decoration, if present, consists of hatched, cross hatched or cord rouletted rim bands (Sadr 1987:272–273). This class can be paralleled with four Pan-Grave types recently defined by Aaron de Souza (2019:91). Moreover, as far as can be seen from the fragmentary materials from the Jebel Mokram Group assemblages, this class is often characterized by a deep cylindrical shape, which

7 In any case, as for the Gash Group ceramics, a programme of archaeometric analysis is at present in progress also for the Jebel Mokram Group ceramics.

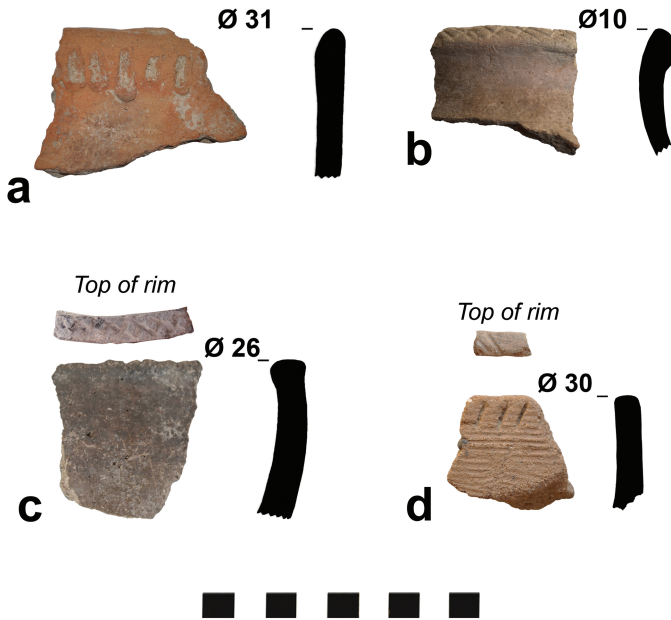


FIGURE 2 Rim sherds of Abu Gamal plain vessels a) from K1 VI C5 SU8, b) from K1 VI D1 SU68, c) from K1 VI C4 SU1; d) rim sherd of an Umm Dahan scraped vessel from UA53 IX B4 SU1.

is distinctive of the Pan-Grave assemblages, while it is lacking in the Kerma and C-Group ones (de Souza 2019:24). Banat Fine sherds can be paralleled with Nubian ceramic materials from the ELE7A and B assemblages at Elephantine, dating between 1750 and 1550 BCE (Raue 2018:258–259, 287–288, Abb. 107.2–4, 111, 131.1–2): these are fragments of thin-walled cylindrical cups with burnished to polished surfaces and modelled rim, often decorated with rim bands.

The Kubdai Incised class is always characterized by cross incised decoration often forming a net pattern covering the upper half of usually black-mouthed bowls, except for a band corresponding to the rim, which is often thickened and modelled (Fig. 4, a, b, c). Sometimes the crossing pattern is divided into zones, sometimes traces of red slip and burnishing characterize the surface (Sadr 1987:273). The widespread occurrence of this kind of shape and decoration in the Pan-Grave pottery has recently been confirmed (de Souza 2019:91, for the decoration see also Table 11). Nubian materials from assemblages ELE7A-B at Elephantine, dating between 1750 and 1550 BCE are characterized by black-topped bowls with thickened and modelled rim and are decorated with crossing incisions on the upper part of the body (Raue 2018:258–259, 287–288, Abb. 102, 104, 119.5, 120.6–7, 121.2, 124, 127). At Elephantine, sherds ascribed to bowls similar to Kubdai Incised examples are also present in assemblages ELE7C and

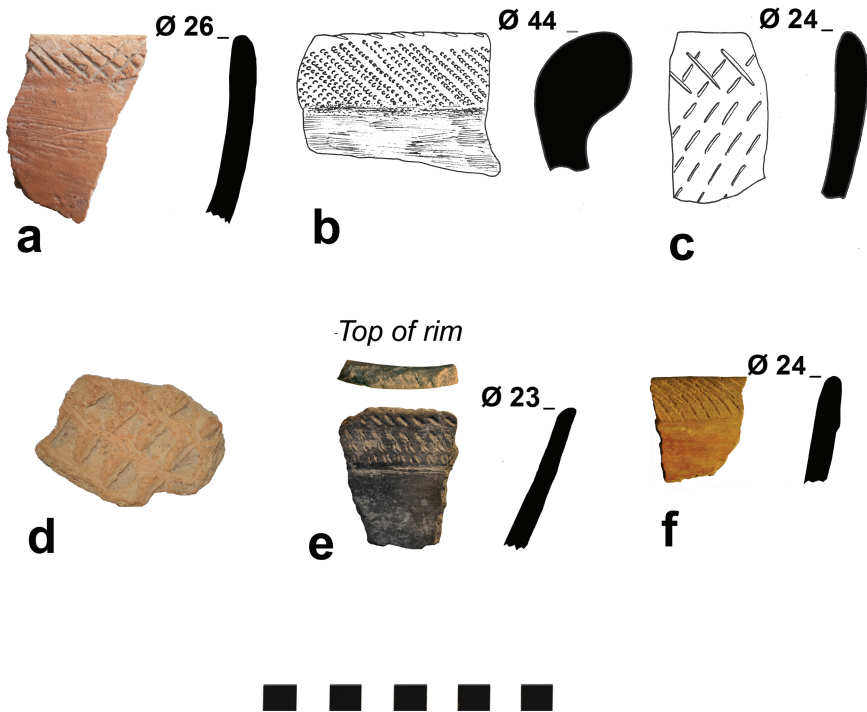


FIGURE 3 Rim sherds of Eghid wiped vessels a) from K1 VI D1 SU68, b) drawing by K. Sadr, unspecified site (archives of the IAMSK and BAP); c) rim sherd of an Avitola punctate vessel, drawing by K. Sadr, unspecified site (archives of the IAMSK and BAP); d) body sherd of an Avitola punctate vessel from K1 VI C5 SU8; rim sherds of Banat fine vessels e) from K1 VI B3 SU9 and f) from K1 VI B4 SU5.

ELE7D (Raue 2018:Abb. 150a, 150.4–6, 151, 171), dating up to 1250 BCE (Raue 2018:258–259, 287–288). Although the cross incised pattern characterizing the Kubdai Incised class also occurs in Kerma and C-Group ceramics and in general in Nubian domestic ceramic assemblages dating to the 2nd millennium BCE (Gratien 2000:120–121, Fig. 14; Rose 2012:27), it is worth noting that in the Jebel Mokram Group it is very often associated with rims separated from the rest of the vessel by a groove/incision or with thickened and modelled rims. This morphological trait can be regarded as a distinctively Pan-Grave element, as it is rare in the C-Group and Kerma assemblages (de Souza 2019:28–29; Giuliani 2006:650).

An interesting variant of the Kubdai Incised class was described by Karim Sadr⁸ and was also collected in the more recently investigated Jebel Mokram

8 This variety, although not mentioned in the papers published in 1987 and 1991 by K. Sadr, was described in his unpublished typology of the Jebel Mokram Group pottery mentioned in note 1.

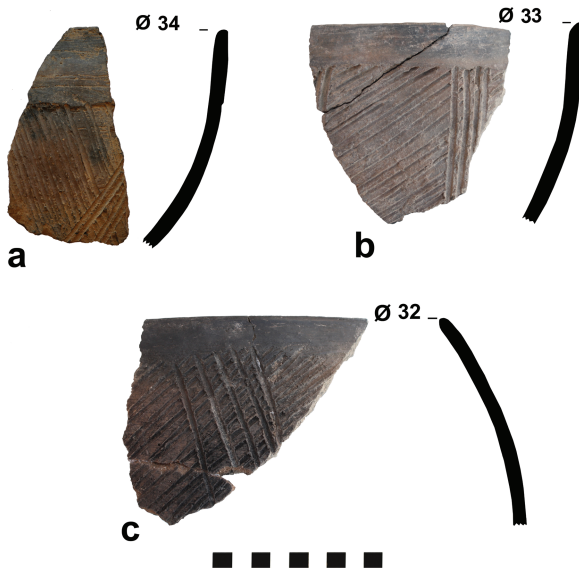


FIGURE 4 Rim sherds of Kubdai incised vessels a) from K1 VIII C2 SU4, b) and c) from K1 VI B5 SU25/48.

Group assemblages. It consists of vessels characterized by a rocker stamp decoration made with a plain-edged tool producing a ‘wolf-tooth’ pattern associated with incised, roughly parallel lines (Fig. 5, a, b). In this variant, the decoration usually covers the entire surface of the vessel. The wolf-tooth pattern remains almost unparalleled in 2nd millennium BCE Nubian cultures, but may find parallels in the locally rooted Atbai Ceramic Tradition, as the pattern and the technique are well-known in the region, at least as from the 4th – early 3rd millennium BCE Butana Group (Winchell 2013:166, Fig. A.14). Notably, rocker stamp decorations are also known in the 4th – 3rd millennium BCE ceramic traditions of the Nubian Nile Valley and of the Eastern Desert (see e.g. Gratien 1978:147, Fig. 40, 3 a; Manzo 2020:70, Fig. 8.4 c; Raue 2018:131, Abb. 28 a, 1).

Gulsa Groove-carved consists of black-mouthed vessels very often characterized by thickened and modelled rims (Fig. 6, a, b). The decoration consists of horizontal, vertical or, frequently, oblique parallel grooves carved on the external surface (Sadr 1987:273). The widespread occurrence of this kind of surface treatment, shape and decoration in the Pan-Grave ceramic assemblages was also recently confirmed (de Souza 2019:91), although in the case of vessels completely covered by horizontal grooves, their occurrence in C-Group settlements was also noted (Bietak 1968:121; Gratien 1985:52, Fig. 12, 157; Gratien 2000:121–122). Similar decorative patterns occur in the assemblage

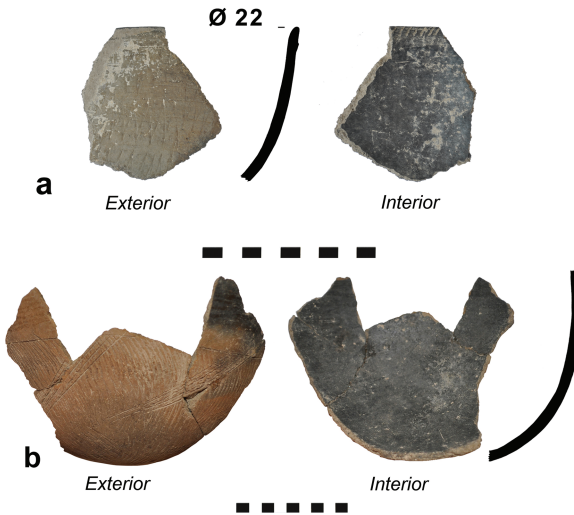


FIGURE 5 a) Rim sherd of a Kubdai incised variant vessel from K1 VI B4-5/C4-5 SU1, b) body fragment of a Kubdai incised variant vessel from K1 VI B5 SU8.

ELE6A, dating to the very end of the 3rd – beginning of the 2nd millennium BCE at Elephantine (Raue 2018:192, Abb. 75), but apparently consisting of more shallow hatching than the wider grooves of the Gulsa Groove-carved. Much more similar to the Gulsa groove-carved are the fragments of modelled rim bowls that occur in assemblage ELE7B and ELE7C at Elephantine, with grey surface along the rim and inside, greyish-brown external surface, careful smoothing if not burnishing, as well as vertical, horizontal or oblique parallel grooves covering most of the external surface (Raue 2018:Abb. 113a, Z4246, Abb. 114.10, Abb. 115.2, Abb. 145a, 145.1), dating from 1700 to 1450 BCE (Raue 2018:287–288).

Gulsa Groove-carved Complex,⁹ which is variant of the Gulsa Groove-carved, is characterized by the occurrence of geometric sectors filled by parallel grooves with different orientations (Sadr 1987:Fig. 5, fragment in the lower row on the right) (Fig. 6, c). The decorative pattern of this variant is paralleled both in the Pan-Grave ceramics and in the Kerma and C-Group ones (Gratien 2000:120–121), and some earlier examples may be identified in assemblages ELE6A at Elephantine, dating to the very end of the 3rd – beginning of the 2nd millennium BCE (Raue:2018, 191–192, Abb. 74).

9 This variety was also first described by K. Sadr in the unpublished typology mentioned in note 1.

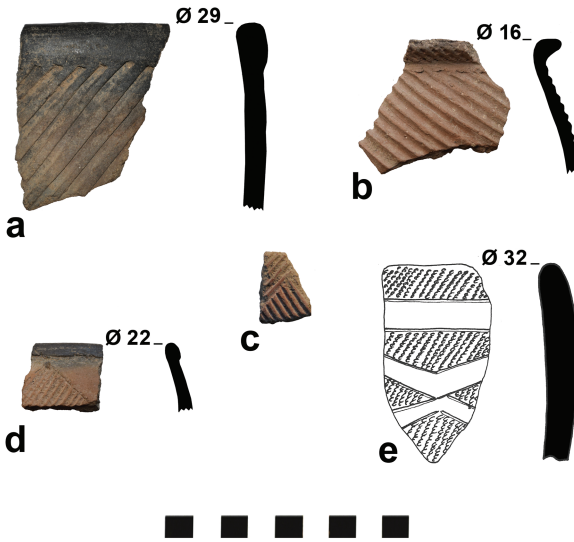


FIGURE 6 Rim sherds of Galsa groove-carved vessels a) from K1 v1 B4-5 SU8 and b) from K1 xv C1 SU110; c) body sherd of a Galsa groove-carved complex vessel from K1 v1 B3 SU9; rim sherds of Garatit complex-impressed vessels, d) from K1 v1 B2 SU134, e) drawing by K. Sadr, unspecified site (archives of the IAMSK and BAP).

The Garatit Complex-impressed class is characterized by decoration consisting of geometric sectors delimited by incised lines filled with dense comb impressions alternating with undecorated burnished geometric sectors, apparently covering the whole vessel (Sadr 1987:273) (Fig. 6, d, e). According to Sadr, this class could recall the C-Group tradition (Sadr 1987, 273), a view recently shared by de Souza, who also extended the possible comparisons to the *Kerma ancien* pottery (de Souza 2019:92).

The Egelit Mat Impressed ware also occurs in some Jebel Mokram Group assemblages (see Fattovich 1990:19) (Fig. 7, a, b),¹⁰ although apparently mostly the later ones. Mat impressed ware is so far unknown in Pan-Grave assemblages, while it occurs in the *Kerma classique* and Second Intermediate Period domestic ones respectively in Upper and Lower Nubia (Gratien 2000:122; Rose 2012:27, Fig. 4–5) and in several Nubian assemblages in Egypt dating from the late Second Intermediate Period to the early 18th Dynasty (see

¹⁰ This name was adopted for mat impressed ware from Jebel Mokram Group assemblages by K. Sadr in the unpublished report mentioned in note 1.

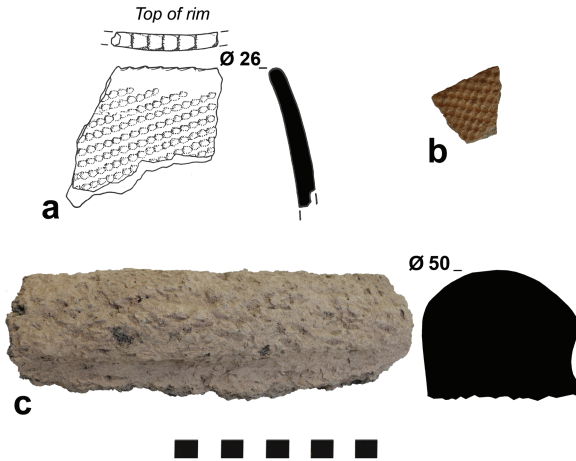


FIGURE 7 a) rim of an Egelit mat impressed vessel drawing by K. Sadr, site SEG4 (archives of the IAMSK and BAP), b) body sherd of an Egelit mat impressed vessel from site UA53; c) rim sherd of a vegetal tempered storage jar from K1 VI D1 SU84.

Aston 2012:169; Ayers & Moeller 2012:111, Fig. 9, ED2562.N.2). Mat impressed ware also occurs at Elephantine in Nubian assemblages from phases ELE7B, ELE7C, and ELE7D (Raue 2018:Abb. 137, 164, 177), roughly dating from 1700 to 1250 BCE (Raue 2018:287–288).

Some fibre/vegetal tempered vessels were also noted in the late Jebel Mokram Group assemblages. In some cases, they are characterized by banded rim decoration, and in these cases labelled as Sharab Plain class.¹¹ This class also includes large storage vessels with thickened rim and trays on a conical foot as from the earlier Jebel Mokram Group assemblages (Fig. 7 c). The use of the fibre/vegetal temper for larger vessels in the Jebel Mokram Group may recall the occurrence in the Pan-Grave ceramic horizon of straw tempered pots with thicker walls (de Souza 2019:32). Nevertheless, these Pan-Grave vessels were apparently used for cooking. On the contrary, the fibre/vegetal tempered vessels of the Jebel Mokram Group, given their shape, dimensions and the lack of the traces of exposure to heat from use over a fire, were likely used for storage and perhaps for serving. It is also worth stressing that fibre/vegetal tempered wares were known in Eastern Sudan at least from the 4th – early 3rd millennium BCE Butana Group (Winchell 2013:190), and in the early 3rd –

¹¹ This name was proposed by K. Sadr in the above-mentioned unpublished typology.

early 2nd millennium BCE Gash Group (Capuano et al. 1994:113). This may suggest that the fibre/vegetal tempered Jebel Mokram Group fabric may be a local development, perhaps rooted in the regional tradition.

To conclude this overview of the possible similarities between the Jebel Mokram Group ceramics and those of the 2nd millennium BCE Nubian cultures, it may be useful to focus on some more specific aspects. In particular, speaking of the relations with the Pan-Grave horizon, it should be considered that most of the attributes characterizing the Pan-Grave ceramic tradition occur widely at Pan-Grave sites in Egypt and Nubia, whereas some Pan-Grave assemblages and phases are characterized by fewer more distinctive traits. Therefore, we may perhaps relate the Jebel Mokram Group to a specific regional variant of the Pan-Grave horizon or to a specific phase thereof on the basis of the occurrence of those rarer traits.

As far as shape is concerned, it has been observed that squat bowls, closed vessels with everted rim, scoops and recessed rims are not ubiquitous in the Pan-Grave horizon (de Souza 2019:117). Despite the fact that the fragmentary state of material from Jebel Mokram Group assemblages may limit our understanding of the original shape of the complete vessels, no possible squat bowls have been identified so far. It is worth noting that vessels characterized by this shape are quite rare in the Pan-Grave horizon, having been identified at only three cemetery sites, Debeira East SJE 47, Adindan K, Hierakonpolis HK21A, and in Phase ELE7B at the settlement site of Elephantine (de Souza 2019:117).

As far as closed vessels with everted rim are concerned, they do occur in the Jebel Mokram Group ceramic assemblages, although not very abundantly, accounting for an average of ca. 4% in the Jebel Mokram Group assemblages investigated in the excavation unit K1 v1 at Mahal Teglinos (K1).¹² They are also rare in the Pan-Grave horizon, contrasting with the Kerma and C-Group ones (de Souza 2019:118). It was also observed that Pan-Grave closed vessels are concentrated in Lower Nubia, while they are indeed rare in the Upper Egyptian assemblages, most likely because a more direct access to high quality Egyptian closed storage vessels with everted rim was possible there (de Souza 2019:118). Nevertheless, the Jebel Mokram Group closed vessels, usually belonging to the Abu Gamal plain and Eghid wiped classes, differ from the Pan-Grave ones (Fig. 2, b, Fig. 3, b). Although the everted and lightly thickened shape of

¹² All the quantitative remarks in the article were based on the data from undisturbed assemblages related to living floors investigated in excavation unit K1 v1, avoiding strata originating from intentional or natural fillings and collapses to avoid any contamination. Overall, these assemblages yielded 383 rim sherds, whose shape and inclination could be recognized. The rim sherds to be ascribed to the same vessel were counted as one.

the rim of the Jebel Mokram Group vessels may recall closed vessels from Debeira East sJE 47 and Hierakonpolis HK47 (see de Souza 2019, Fig. 27 e and g respectively), the closed vessels of the Jebel Mokram Group are often characterized by triangular notches on the lip (Fig. 8 a, b). In some cases, the Jebel Mokram Group closed vessels are also characterized by bands of oblique comb impressions along the rim, often in addition to triangular notches on the lip (see e.g. Fig. 3, b). In turn, these bands of comb impressions recall the decoration of late *Kerma moyen* and *Kerma classique* vessels with similar shape (Privati 2004:166, 186, Fig. 129, 17, Fig. 143, 11; see also Ayers & Moeller 2012:114, Fig. 8 ED2547.N.3; Rose 2012:27). Similar jars with thickened rim and rim bands consisting of oblique comb impressions also occur in the Nubian component of assemblages of phase ELE7B at Elephantine, dating from 1700 to 1550 BCE (Raue 2018:287–288, Abb. 112.1).

Neither scoops nor vessels with recessed rims have so far been recorded in the Jebel Mokram Group ceramic assemblages. In the Pan-Grave horizon, both these classes seem to occur mainly at Egyptian sites and, in the case of the

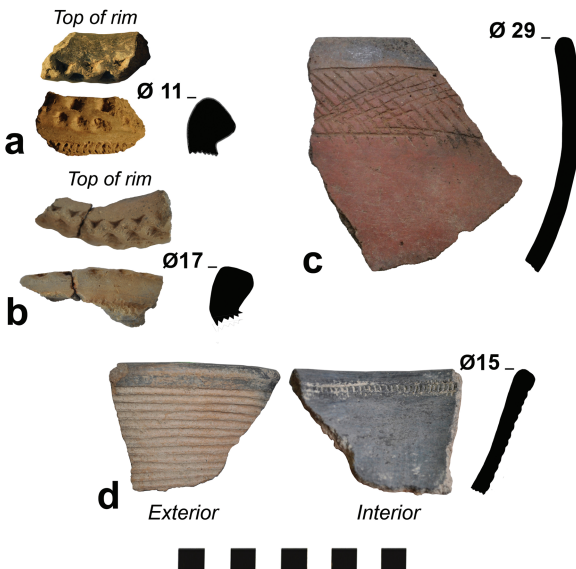


FIGURE 8 Rim sherds of vessels with thickened everted rim and triangular notches, a) from K1 VI B4 SU5, b) from K1 VI B4-5/C4-5 SU1; c) rim sherd of a defined black-top rim banded late Gash Group vessel from K1 IX D2 SU18; d) rim sherd of a defined black-top late Gash Group groove carved vessel from K1 VI B4 SU30.

recessed rims, to be typical of the late Second Intermediate Period except for a few possible earlier examples from assemblages of Phases ELE7B and 7C at Elephantine and from Tell Edfu (de Souza 2019:118).

Finally, it is also to be noted that some typical Pan-Grave shapes like the horned bowls, often associated with feather and herringbone decoration, do not occur in the Jebel Mokram Group ceramic assemblages (de Souza 2019:24–25, 48, Fig. 44–45).

As far as surface treatment is concerned, Jebel Mokram Group assemblages are characterized by the widespread occurrence of sherds showing black inner surface and an irregular black band along the rim, contrasting with the reddish or brown external surfaces (see e.g. Fig. 4, a, b, c, Fig. 5, b, Fig. 6, a, d). They can therefore be paralleled with the irregular black-topped vessels characterizing most of the Pan-Grave assemblages (de Souza 2019:36). The vessels defined black-tops, which may represent a later development in the Pan-Grave tradition of Lower Nubia and Egypt, dating to the Second Intermediate Period (de Souza 2019:119–121, 123–124), also occur in Jebel Mokram Group assemblages (see e.g. Fig. 6, b), but they may not have the same chronological significance in Eastern Sudan as they already occur in the earlier Gash Group ceramics (see e.g. Fig. 8, c, d). As far as the black and red wares are concerned, both tentatively considered markers of the later developments of the Pan-Grave ceramic traditions (de Souza 2019:124–126), apparently, they do not occur in the Jebel Mokram Group assemblages.

Some further remarks on specific aspects of the Jebel Mokram Group ceramic decoration can be added. Notches on top of the lip may characterize some Abu Gamal Plain vessels within the Jebel Mokram Group assemblages (see e.g. Fig. 2, c). These notches on top of the lip also occur in different assemblages, in some cases labelled as *Kerma classique* (see Rose 2012:19, Fig. 4.13, 4.22, Fig. 6.33), in others as Pan-Grave (Gatto et al. 2012:98, Fig. 9.1–2), although in general the notches on top of the rim are regarded as rare in the Pan-Grave horizon (de Souza 2019:50). They also occur in Nubian materials from domestic assemblages from Egyptian sites dating from the late Second Intermediate Period to the early 18th Dynasty (Ayers and Moeller 2012, Fig. 9.2562.N.1) and in Nubia in assemblages dating to the Second Intermediate Period (Gratien 1985:Figs. 11.314 and 352, 12.151, 13.210, 221, 223, 265, 275 and 311). Nevertheless, as far as the origin of this decorative trait in the Jebel Mokram Group is concerned, there is no need to relate it to adoption of a foreign pattern. Vessels with pinched and indented rims and vessels with notches on the rim were being produced in the ceramic tradition of Eastern Sudan at least from the 4th millennium BCE (see Winchell 2013:148–149, Fig. A.1.161, Fig. A.10–12.171, Fig. A.18–20), and are also frequently encountered in the Gash

Group since its earliest phase (Fig. 9). In any case, it is worth mentioning that decorative patterns consisting of notches on the rim also occur in the Eastern Desert, apparently associated with 4th-early 3rd millennium BCE vessels (Manzo 2020:70, Fig. 8.4 d, Fig. 8.5 a, c).

The Jebel Mokram Group Exogenous Component: Pan-Grave or Middle Nubian?

Table 1 summarizes the similarities between the Jebel Mokram Group ceramic classes and the ceramics of the Pan-Grave and other Nubian cultures described in the previous section.

The table clearly shows the links between the Jebel Mokram Group pottery and the Atbai Ceramic Tradition, observed from the very beginning of studies on the Jebel Mokram Group. Indeed, six of the Jebel Mokram Group ceramic classes can be safely related to the Atbai Ceramic Tradition. Nevertheless, a specific link with the Pan-Grave culture also emerges, as five of the ten Jebel Mokram Group ceramic classes can be related to the Pan-Grave ceramic horizon. Moreover, considering the quantitative occurrence of the classes exclusively related to the Pan-Grave in the Jebel Mokram Group assemblages in excavation unit K1 v1 at Mahal Teglinos, they represent the larger component,

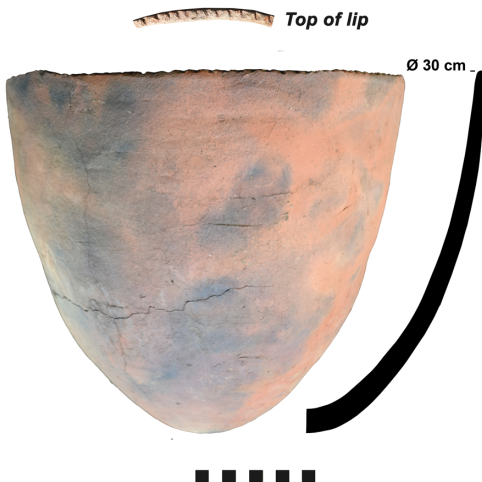


FIGURE 9 A complete early Gash Group bowl with impressed notches on the top of the lip from K1 XII E4 SU125 Tomb 65.

TABLE 1 Similarities between the Jebel Mokram Group ceramic classes and the ceramics of the Pan-Grave and other Nubian and local cultures

Jebel Mokram Group Classes	Atbai Ceramic Tradition	Pan-Grave	C-Group	Kerma
<i>Kubdai Incised</i>		X	X*	X*
<i>Gulsa</i>	X**	X	X**	X**
<i>Groove-carved</i>				
<i>Banat Fine</i>		X		
<i>Garatit</i>			X	X
<i>Complex-impressed</i>				
<i>Avitola</i>	X		X	X
<i>Punctate</i>				
<i>Abu Gamal Plain</i>	X	X		
<i>Umm Dahan Scraped</i>	X			
<i>Eghid Wiped</i>	X	X		
<i>Egelid Mat Impressed</i>				X
<i>Sharab Plain</i>	X			

* as far as vessels with direct, not banded rim are concerned.

** as far as horizontal grooves are concerned.

ranging from 40% to over 60% of the typological sherds.¹³ A similar pattern was evident in the case of the ceramic assemblages brought to light in excavation unit K1 III at Mahal Teglinos and in the ones from other sites in Eastern Sudan (Sadr 1987:286–287, Fig. 6, 12; Sadr 1990:69–70, Fig. 6).

Of course, it must be noted that some of the Jebel Mokram Group ceramic classes are also characterized by traits occurring in both local and Nubian

13 In this case all the typological sherds from the reliable assemblages of K1 VI excavation unit were taken into consideration (see note 12). By typological sherds the ones that, based on their shape, decoration or surface treatment, can be ascribed to a specific class are meant. Overall, these assemblages yielded 489 typological sherds. The sherds to be ascribed to the same vessel were counted as one.

traditions, such as in the case of Gulsa Groove-carved. As pointed out in the previous section, vessels completely covered by horizontal parallel grooves show widespread occurrence in the entire Middle Nubian horizon and in the Gash Group (see e.g. Fig. 8, d). Nevertheless, it is also observed that the Gulsa Groove-carved vessels with oblique or vertical parallel grooves, which are much more distinctive of the Jebel Mokram Group, occur solely in the Pan-Grave assemblages. In the case of the Kubdai Incised, the decorative pattern consisting of crossing oblique bands of incisions covering the upper part of the vessels certainly occurs in all Nubian traditions (see above). However, in both the Jebel Mokram Group and in the Pan-Grave horizon this decorative pattern is often associated with rims which are distinctly separated from the rest of the body by a groove or incision, corresponding to the direct banded rim in the classification system for the Pan-Grave ceramics recently proposed by Aaron de Souza, or with modelled and thickened rims, which also frequently occur in the Pan-Grave ceramic horizon (de Souza, 2019:28).

It is precisely the shape of the rims which was regarded as a distinctive trait of the Pan-Grave horizon in the broader Middle Nubian context in the more recent studies (Giuliani 2007:650; see also de Souza 2019:28–29). At this point, it may be interesting to consider the quantitative occurrence of banded and modelled rims in the Jebel Mokram Group assemblages in comparison with the earlier Gash Group ones. To do so, we may refer once again to the stratigraphic sequence of excavation unit VI at Mahal Teglinos (K1), where the transition between these two cultural units was investigated (Fig. 10). There, the direct non-banded rims accounted for more than 80% of the rims in the Gash Group assemblage and decreased to the 50% in Jebel Mokram Group assemblages while the frequency of banded rims increases to 15%. Modelled rims are absent from the Gash Group assemblages but account for an average of ca. 20% in the Jebel Mokram ones.¹⁴

Returning to the comparative observations on the Jebel Mokram Group ceramic classes (Table 1), some possible similarities between these ceramic classes on one hand and the Kerma culture and the C-Group ceramic classes on the other were also pointed out. This is the case of the Garatit Complex-impressed, Avitola Punctate and, only as far as possible parallelism with the Kerma tradition is concerned, the Egelit Mat Impressed. Nevertheless, in the case of the Avitola Punctate, it is worth noting that the class may also be rooted in the Atbai Ceramic Tradition and that it should not necessarily be regarded as an exogenous innovation (see above). From the quantitative point of view, these classes, possibly related to Kerma and C-Group cultures, never exceed a

14 For the sample size see note 12.

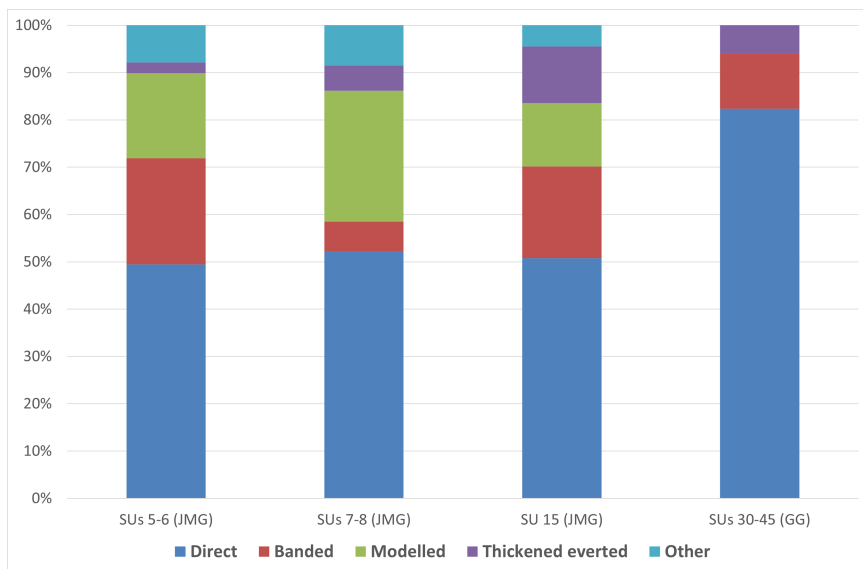


FIGURE 10 Frequencies of direct, banded, modelled and everted rims in Jebel Mokram Group and Gash Group assemblages from excavation unit K1 v1 at Mahal Teglinos.

proportion of 3% in the Jebel Mokram Group ceramic assemblages brought to light in excavation unit K1 v1 at Mahal Teglinos (K1) (Manzo 2017a:Fig. 4).¹⁵ Therefore, even though it is possible that not only the Pan-Grave features but also traits related to other Middle Nubian cultures occur in the Jebel Mokram Group ceramic assemblages, from the quantitative point of view they are always a minor component. These links with the Kerma and C-Group ceramic traditions are not surprising in the Jebel Mokram Group assemblages, given that the earlier Gash Group is also characterized by the occurrence of ceramic traits related to Kerma and the C-Group, if not actual imports from Upper and Lower Nubia (Manzo 1997:79–80; see also Manzo 2017b:33–35).

Even if the Pan-Grave related traits prevail in the Jebel Mokram Group assemblages, these cannot simply be labelled as Pan-Grave. On one hand, the above-mentioned occurrence of some classes and traits rooted in the Atbai Ceramic Tradition should be considered, but on the other the Jebel Mokram Group assemblages lack some of the most distinctive (even if not most common) Pan-Grave types such as the horned bowls, scoops or recessed rim. It is noteworthy that vessels with recessed rims only appear to occur in the later phases of the Pan-Grave (de Souza 2019:118). As the Jebel Mokram Group seems to have lasted long after the latest Pan-Grave sites in Nubia and Egypt

¹⁵ For the sample size see note 13.

(Manzo 2017b:44; Manzo 2018:271), this may suggest that this specific Pan-Grave feature did not reach Eastern Sudan. The absence of scoops from the Jebel Mokram Group assemblages may be related to their rarity in the Pan-Grave ones, as they only occur at Mostagedda and Qau (de Souza 2019:118). As far as the horned bowls are concerned, their absence from the Jebel Mokram Group assemblages may be related to their general lack in settlement assemblages (de Souza 2019:25) and to our still limited knowledge of the Jebel Mokram Group mortuary contexts (Manzo 2017b:47). Considering the rarity of some of these types in Pan-Grave assemblages, it is highly possible that they occurred only in specific regions, and possibly not in those interacting more intensively with Eastern Sudan, presumably in the Eastern Desert. Alternatively, these Pan-Grave types may simply not have been adopted for unknown reasons, which may suggest a selective attitude towards the exogenous types to be adopted and used in Eastern Sudan. Hopefully these issues will be clarified through continued explorations both in Eastern Sudan and in the Eastern Desert.

As previously noted (Manzo 2017a:103–104), Jebel Mokram Group ceramics are also characterized by considerable originality despite being rooted in the local Atbai Ceramic Tradition as well as by several Pan-Grave-related traits. Apparently, this was not only a receptive phase but also a phase of experimentation and innovation in the ceramic production of Eastern Sudan. So much is evident, for example, in the above-mentioned variant of the Kubdai Incised class characterized by the association of the Nubian-like incised parallel lines with the rocker-impressed pattern made with a tool with continuous edge. The rocker-impressed pattern may have been a survival from earlier phases of the Atbai Ceramic tradition or an element adopted from the Eastern Desert (see above). Although the origin of the rocker-impressed component of this distinctive pattern remains to be clarified, this Kubdai Incised variant might represent a case of entanglement combining traits of different origin in an original synthesis, as happened in the cases of some single vessels or even ceramic classes in Nubia and Egypt (see e.g. de Souza 2020; Raue 2018:279). The flasks and middle-size jars with everted thickened rims decorated with bands of triangular notches on the lip are also original and, based on the available evidence, distinctly typical of the Jebel Mokram Group (Fig. 8, a, b); they may well represent a local innovation. Nevertheless, in this last case we cannot rule out the possibility that the lack of evidence of this class of closed vessels from Egypt and Nubia may be due to the general rarity of closed vessels in the Pan-Grave assemblages from those regions, in turn related to the occurrence of Egyptian flasks and jars in the same assemblages (see above). Nor can we rule out the possibility that flasks and jars with triangular impressed notches on the lip similar to those from Jebel Mokram Group assemblages may be found

in other thus-far unexplored regions of the Pan-Grave horizon, somewhere in the Eastern Desert. Nevertheless, for the moment there is no such evidence in the few scattered elements available for that broad region (see Manzo 2020).

Conclusions

To sum up, the Jebel Mokram Group ceramic production seems to be an original synthesis of locally rooted traits, innovative local experimentations and exogenous elements. The exogenous elements seem characterized not so much by affiliation to the broad generic Middle Nubian horizon as to specific links with the Pan-Grave horizon. To try to finally answer the question in the title of this paper on the basis of the available ceramic evidence, I believe that the Jebel Mokram Group of Eastern Sudan can be regarded as both part of the Atbai Ceramic Tradition and a component of the much-varied Pan-Grave horizon, as recently defined by Aaron de Souza. Of course, the Jebel Mokram Group can also be regarded as a component of the Middle Nubian 'super-horizon', sharing traits and elements that were typical mainly (if not exclusively) of the Pan-Grave horizon. The few remaining possible Middle Nubian traits may have been adopted in the framework of continuous relations with Lower and Upper Nubia, involving Eastern Sudan, as in earlier Gash Group times (Manzo 2017b:33–35).

The shared traits in the ceramic production suggest that the Jebel Mokram Group was, to current knowledge, the southernmost node of the networks of socio-cultural relations extending as far as Lower Nubia and Egypt to the north and probably involving large sectors of the Eastern Desert. Of course, the rise and development of such networks largely remain unexplained. Their geographic extent, stretching for more than 1000 km, may support the hypothesis that they emerged from general dynamics with large-scale impact on the human groups inhabiting the regions involved. In the case of the emergence of the Jebel Mokram Group, these dynamics may be identified with the above-mentioned environmental changes affecting the short-term seasonal mobility patterns in an extensive area and/or favoring the long-term displacement of human groups. But the involvement in long-distance trade may also have played a part, as was already the case in Gash Group times (Manzo 2017a:110; Manzo 2017b:54; Sadr 1987:273; Sadr 1990:80).

Perhaps future discourse should not focus on the labels themselves, which are all debatable and ultimately to be regarded only as heuristic tools, and with awareness of the complexity we will invariably find behind all of them. Instead, greater attention should be paid to the dynamics from which these

networks originated, evidence of which we note in the material culture. In the case of the origins and development of Jebel Mokram Group, new insights into these dynamics will hopefully arrive from the much-needed continuation of exploration in Eastern Sudan and its neighboring regions.

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