

A Meroitic grave stele from Ambikol island in the Batn al-Hajar.

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The scale of Meroitic settlement within the Batn al-Hajar seems to have been relatively limited, with only a few settlements between Gemai, at the south end of the Second Cataract, and the Dal cataract. The largest of these may have been at Tila island, c. 6 km south of Semna, with perhaps another one somewhere around Semna, where there were two large Meroitic cemeteries. Some 30 other Meroitic cemeteries have been identified within the region, and test excavations at most of these during the Archaeological Survey of Sudanese Nubia (ASSN) of 1963-1969. This work confirmed the presence of a small number of larger cemeteries at Gemai [Cemetery 100], Murshid [11-I-7], Semna [16-E-15, 16-J-3] and Dal East [21-V-6], the others were all quite small, with an average of no more than 20 graves (Edwards 1996). A small cluster of other Meroitic cemeteries, including one large site [21-N-15] was identified on the east bank in the Ukma/Akasha area (Maystre 1996). The large multi-period cemetery [21-N-13], mainly of post-Meroitic (X-Group) and medieval date, a cluster of early Meroitic graves, likely of similar date to examples excavated at Amir Abdallah near Abri are notable as one of the few sites of this date so far identifiable in northern Nubia (Fernandez 1983; 2018). The third site [21-N-16] comprised only a handful of robbed graves.

Little evidence was found for any settlements associated with these cemeteries. While the settlement [16-J-20] on Tila island was a largely of mudbrick construction, it remains uncertain whether other settlements took this form, or may have been more of simpler and/or more ephemeral construction. Whether or not there was extensive permanent settlement in the region during the Meroitic period is itself far from certain. It is not likely, however, that the remains of smaller rough stone buildings, widely encountered in the region in many periods, may have been overlooked during the ASSN fieldwork. Occasional Meroitic sherd scatters recorded by the ASSN do however suggest at least a thin spread of occupation through the region.

If certainly quite thinly populated, the Meroitic material presence within this region is of some interest for our understanding of various aspects of Meroitic culture. These in turn may have the potential to inform us of aspects of the varied social networks connecting and differentiating different regions. Upriver, the modern region of the Sikood (Soleb – Sedeinga – Sai – Abri) was one important settlement focus likely to be linked to populations within the Batn al-Hajar. The importance of Sedeinga (*Atiye*) in particular as a Meroitic regional centre in being made increasingly apparent by ongoing fieldwork there (Rilly and Francigny 2018). However, it is possible that other connections might be sought to the north, in Lower Nubia proper, below the Second Cataract. Recent studies of some of the more distinctive pottery types (David 2018) encountered within Middle and Lower Nubia are beginning to provide some indications of likely networks of connectivity.

Regional variability, if still poorly understood may also be evident in Meroitic epigraphic habits, known largely from funerary inscriptions. The occurrence of titles and toponyms in such texts are likely to prove useful in providing other forms of evidence for intra- and inter-regional social networks, while there is some reason to suspect that some variability in the more formulaic elements of such texts could also be informative. Few grave stele, or other funerary inscriptions are however known from this region. A single fragment of a grave stele was found at Gemai (REM 1012) during the excavation of a post-Meroitic tumulus, which overlay the Meroitic cemetery. None were reported from the Semna

cemeteries. One stele¹ was recovered from the small island cemetery at Tila [16-J-19] and a fragment of another from the larger cemetery [16-J-3] on the east bank closeby.² A very small fragment of another was found at Ukma [21-N-15] (Maystre 1996: 145, pl. LXIII.1). Some uninscribed offering tables and a ba-statue³ were also recovered during test excavations in a large cemetery [21-V-6] at Dal East.

Amongst these few inscriptions, a further interesting example will be presented here, found associated with a small cluster of Meroitic burials at Touroka, on Ambikol island (site [16-R-11]), in the southern Batn al-Hajar (figure 1). No settlement was identified on the island, although it is possible that some of the many small stone structures scattered across the island could have been of this date. Otherwise, the nearest Meroitic site downstream was one c. 10 km away at Duweishat West [16-N-16], while the nearest one upstream was c. 17 km away, on Tangur island [15-Y-4]. The area of Ambikol island is one where seasonal rapids can create a barrier to river transport, a factor likely significant in the location of sites in this period. These burials formed part of a much larger area of burials, in possibly several groups, registered as a single site. The (limited) test excavations carried out December 1967-January 1968, suggested these were mainly of late post-Meroitic (X-Group) and medieval (Christian) date. On the basis of the survey and test excavations it was estimated that there were no more than c. 30 Meroitic graves amongst a total of c. 270 graves and c. 70 storage pits.

During the test excavations, one inscribed funerary stele was found in the shaft fill of grave 56. This was first published by Edwards in 2006⁴ but as a drawing only, based on a facsimile copy (scale 1:1) in the ASSN archive. The original drawing (dated 15.4.1968) was made by Bengt Schönback.⁵ The accompanying finds card reads: „16-R-11:56:1 stela of sandstone with Meroitic inscription. The surface of the stone with the text has been polished probably after the cutting of the letters. The letters have been cut with a sharp instrument, probably of iron. Part of the text, especially on the left side of the stone, has been lost by erosion – the sandstone is very soft and tends to disintegrate. Length of stone 34 cm, width 16.5 cm and thickness ca. 5.5 cm. – Found in the fill of the entrance shaft of the grave.”

The drawing is of good quality and its special value lies in the fact that it was done directly from the stone. However, some „atypical“ Meroitic signs especially in the middle lines of the inscription show clearly that the drawing and with it the reading of the text can be improved. Happily, some good photos in different light were made from the object⁶ and permit a detailed check of the drawing. This improved drawing is published (figure 3) together with a photo of the stele (figure 2) at the end of the article.

The stele is complete and also the text on it with a few exceptions. On the left edge the last sign is lost in general and in a few cases one or two additional signs (lines 1, 4-9 and 13). On the bottom the first sign is lost in lines (17-18) and two signs are lost in line (19). Because the latter was inscribed with two signs only and perhaps a word divider, this line is now completely lost. The text can be transliterated as follows:

- (1) *wos qetne[yi]*
- (2) *neqeli: sori:*
- (3) *qetrri: sme*

¹ Finds registration cards for all these objects from part of the ASSN archive. Stele 16-J-19/0/1 = SNM.20143.

² Stele fragments 16-J-3/5/1 = SNM.20146.

³ The offering tables were registered as SNM.19628 and SNM.19781; the ba-statue as SNM.20036.

⁴ Edwards 2006: 64, fig. 5.

⁵ The stele was registered in Khartoum as SNM.22392.

⁶ Photos ASSN C001:01-2; C150:2-3; C160:1-3.

- (4) *teyeqowi*: [se]
- (5) *bedoye*: te[d]
- (6) *helowi*: b[l]
- (7) *ye terik*[elo]
- (8) *wi*: tk: sime[te]
- (9) *lowi*: tkitelw
- (10) *yeremlo* 20
- (11) *yeredebi*
- (12) *telw*: yere
- (13) *mlo* 10+8 y[e]
- (14) *tekelowi*: a
- (15) *to*: mhe: pisohte:
- (16) *at mhe*: pisi
- (17) [h]rkete: ah
- (18) [m]lo[l]i: holk
- (19) [ete]

The text follows the traditional scheme of Meroitic funerary texts closely and can be divided in the following five sections:

Invocation: The text opens with the so-called solemn invocation in which the names of the divinities Isis and Osiris are enlarged by the words *qetne*[yi]neqeli and *qetrri* respectively.⁷

Nomination: The inscription continues with the name of the deceased and those of his or her parents. The name of the deceased, *smeteye*, is unique and therefore the gender of the deceased cannot be defined.

Filiation: His mother is [se]bedoye and his father b[l]ye. The name of the mother is not attested elsewhere but the female name *sebedmn*[i] (REM 0318/3-4)⁸ uses the same formative element *sebed* so that the restoration of the last sign of line (4) as *se* is more likely than *y* followed by a small lost sign. This name of the father, *b[l]ye*, is attested as a female personal name in REM 0332/4 (name of the mother of the deceased) but also as the bearer of the title *qorene* and therefore obviously as a male personal name in REM 2424/x+7 (Hallof 2015: 203-205). In the combination *apne:blye* (GA 030/2) the word occurs as second part of the name of a father's (and therefore as part of male personal names) in an inscription from Gebel Adda (Millet 2005: 27). It is noteworthy that the element *blye* is separated by a word divider from the first part of the personal name,⁹ a clear indication that *blye* forms a word in its own right. It is therefore not surprisingly to find the element as a separate name, but now for the first time surely as the name of a man.

Description: The description is formed by two phrases:

1) *tk sime*[te]lowi – „he is a *tk* in *sime*“: the clause is a combination of the noun *tk*, the place name *sime*, the locative suffix *-te*, the article *-l*, the copula *-o* and the particle *-wi*. The noun *tk* forms clearly a title of the deceased. The title is unknown so far, but not the word *tk*, which is known as a verb (*tk* – „to love“) and occurs as a particle after nouns.¹⁰ Both words are obviously not related to the title *tk* in the present text. Contrary to this, the place name *sime* is attested in other inscriptions. Two examples are known, both from Sedeinga, and both show the title combination *tqi simetel* (REM 1116/1-2 and REM 1090/13-14; here only partly preserved). It is therefore likely that this sacerdotal title is also written here and that *tk* forms

⁷ For a detailed explanation of the solemn invocation see Rilly 2007: 94.

⁸ Read by Griffith (1911: 118) as *sebeden*. His drawing, however, (p. 170) clearly shows the consonant *m* for the penultima sign.

⁹ And this is also the case with *beni:blye*, the name of a deceased of female gender in GA 022/1-2.

¹⁰ Rilly 2003: 257 s.v. *tk* (2) and *tk* (4); The particle occurs frequently in REM 1138 [Hallof – Hallof 2012]. It is added directly to nouns (*dttk*; *dtbolnetk*, *asebetk*) but also to nouns in the genitive (*amnissetk* REM 1138/26-27) and nouns with the suffix *-(y)ose* (*ttney[o]setk* REM 1138/19).

another variant writing to *tqi* of which the different forms *ateqi* and *tqe* are also known. Such occurrences may also then provide some indication of the localisation of this place.

2) *tkitelw*: *yeremlo* 20 *yeredebitelw*: *yeremlo* 18 *y[e]tekelowi* – „for the *tkite* 20 *yeremlo* (and) for the *yeredebite* 18 *yeremlo*, (this is) *y[e]teke*“: the two clauses before the final copula have exactly the same structure and are formed by three elements: a title, enlarged by the dative suffix *-lw*, the noun *yeremlo* and a number. The transliteration of the word *yeremlo* is a matter of discussion and often the reading *yerehlo* is preferred (Rilly 2007: 198). One of the oldest examples, the stele REM 1257 (from the Archaic palaeographic period) clearly shows *m* instead of *h* and therefore the reading *yeremlo* is given preference here. As the sentence structure clearly shows, the word *yeremlo* does certainly not form a verbal complex because this follows thereafter (*y[e]tekelowi*). On contrary, the word means „a good *yer(e)*“ and seems to designate a valuable liquid (milk?) in offerings.¹¹

The meaning of both titles is unsure. Concerning *tkite* it has been assumed that the word expresses a relation between women.¹² The present example, however, does not add support to strengthen this idea. Concerning *yeredebitelw yeremlo* the same phrase is found in REM 0614/2-3 where *aredebilw yeremlo* 6 is written. The only difference except the changing of the prefix¹³ is the insertion of the infix *-te-* before the dative suffix *-lw*, which cannot be explained satisfactorily because the word is not a toponym where the ending makes sense. The insertion of a phrase with *yeremlo* in the description of a funerary text is rare but not unknown (attested for example is REM 1091/6 and REM 1340/B6). The final verb *yetekelowi*, a combination of the noun *yeteke*, the article *-l*, the copula *-o* and the particle *-wi* says, that the two *yeremlo* „are *yeteke*“. The correct meaning of the noun is unknown.¹⁴

Benediction: Finally three benediction formulae follow: A – B – C. The verbal forms *pisohte* and *pisi[h]rkete* are known from other examples (for example REM 0234/9-10 and REM 0314/7-9, both from Karanog) as is the form *ah[m]lo[l]i* instead the simple form *hmlol* (for example REM 0520/6-8, from Faras). The sequence A – B – C of the benediction formulae is frequently attested.

The most interesting feature is the fact that the funerary text makes use of the *yeremlo*-formula, otherwise mainly known from graffiti on the temple at Kawa. The only examples so far known are REM 1091 and REM 1340 (two lintels from Sedeinga) in which *yeremlo*-phrases are also included in the description of the funerary inscription. At this, REM 1091 shows the same grammatical structure (noun + *-lw* + *yeremlo* + number) as the present text.¹⁵ The Ambikol inscription offers another example for this rare feature. The inscription from Ambikol can be dated to the palaeographic period Transitionnel C (i.e. the 2nd century CE.). The known parallels may further suggest connections to the Sedeinga area, links perhaps also indicated in other aspects of the material culture of Meroitic sites in the southern Batn al-Hajar. This text also provides further evidence concerning the toponym *Sime*, as yet unlocated. Might this suggest a location in the Batn al-Hajar?

Here it may also be noted that this was not the only funerary inscription in this small cemetery. A fragment of another was found in the fill of a disturbed infant burial of uncertain date.¹⁶ While a very small piece, this appears to have been part of an inscription with an

¹¹ Benediction formula L. For the meaning of this offering formula and the meaning „milk“ see Rilly 2007: 179.

¹² Rilly 2003: 258-259, s.v. *tkite*.

¹³ The replacement of the prefix *a-* with the prefix *ye-* in later times is a common feature in Meroitic language; Rilly 2007: 286-292.

¹⁴ Rilly 2003: 250-251, s.v. *teke*. He attributes *yetekelowi* to the verb *teke*, for which the meaning „to know“, „to count“ (as a Meroitic synonym for the Egyptian verb *ḫ*) or „to execute a function“ is proposed. Neither fits the present example satisfactorily.

¹⁵ REM 1091/6: *athmo pedemetelw yeremlo k[rorolowi: ate]betilw yeremlo 10+8 yete[kelow]i*.

¹⁶ Grave 103. Registered as 16-R-11/103/1 = SNM.21063. Archive photo: ASSN C144:34. The fragment measured 6.2 x 3.9 cm, and was c. 1.5 cm thick.

incised dividing lines (figures 4 and 5). While of limited value for textual studies, this provides further evidence for epigraphic practice in this region.

The small fragment shows the remains of two lines of text. The identification of the signs of line (1) is hampered by a blot of dark colour and a transliteration is impossible. Line (2) shows the last and the first sign of a word each with a word divider inbetween.¹⁷

(1) ...

(2) ...*e*: *y*...

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¹⁷ It is possible that the fragment is to be turned upside down (as done in the drawing in the excavation documentation). This would result in the following transliteration: (1) ...*[te]*... (2) ...*y*: *e*... The fact that words with initial *e* are attested till the paleographic period Transitional B only (Rilly 2007: 291-292), and the fact that the present text was written later, makes this assumption unlikely.

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Figure 1. Location of cemetery [16-R-11] on Ambikol island (photo ASSN archive).

Figure 2. Stele 16-R-11/56/1 = SNM.22392 (photo ASSN C001X:1).

Figure 3. Stele 16-R-11/56/1 = SNM.22392 (drawing © Jochen Hallof)

Figure 4. Stele fragment 16-R-11/103/1 = SNM.21063 (photo ASSN C144:34)

Figure 5. Stele fragment 16-R-11/103/1 = SNM.21063 (drawing © Bengt Schönback)