

NUBIAN EXPEDITION PUBLICATION PROJECT

LISA A. HEIDORN AND BRUCE BEYER WILLIAMS

A high point in this year's activities was the completion and submission of the manuscript for the first volume presenting work carried out in 2007 and 2008 by the ISAC (then Oriental Institute) Nubian Expedition in the Fourth Cataract: *The Cemeteries at al-Widay*, by Lisa A. Heidorn and Bruce Beyer Williams, with contributions by Geoff Emberling, Megan Ingvolstad, Joanna Then-Obłuska, and Sarah Adcock. The two cemeteries at al-Widay have been discussed in previous annual reports, but a few features deserve mention here. First, the main cemetery of al-Widay I, belonging to the Old Kush period that was roughly contemporary with the Kerma culture in the Dongola Reach downstream, was the largest cemetery of the period in the cataract zone (fig. 1) that was completely excavated. This fact alone gave it special significance, as it documented a single community through roughly a century and a half, from about 1850 to 1600 BCE.

One of the chief findings of the rescue project in 2006–8 was the realization that the cultures of the Fourth Cataract were not identical to those found downstream. This discovery led to the use of a new label, Old Kush, to distinguish these unique cultures from the culture of ancient Kerma. The region was certainly

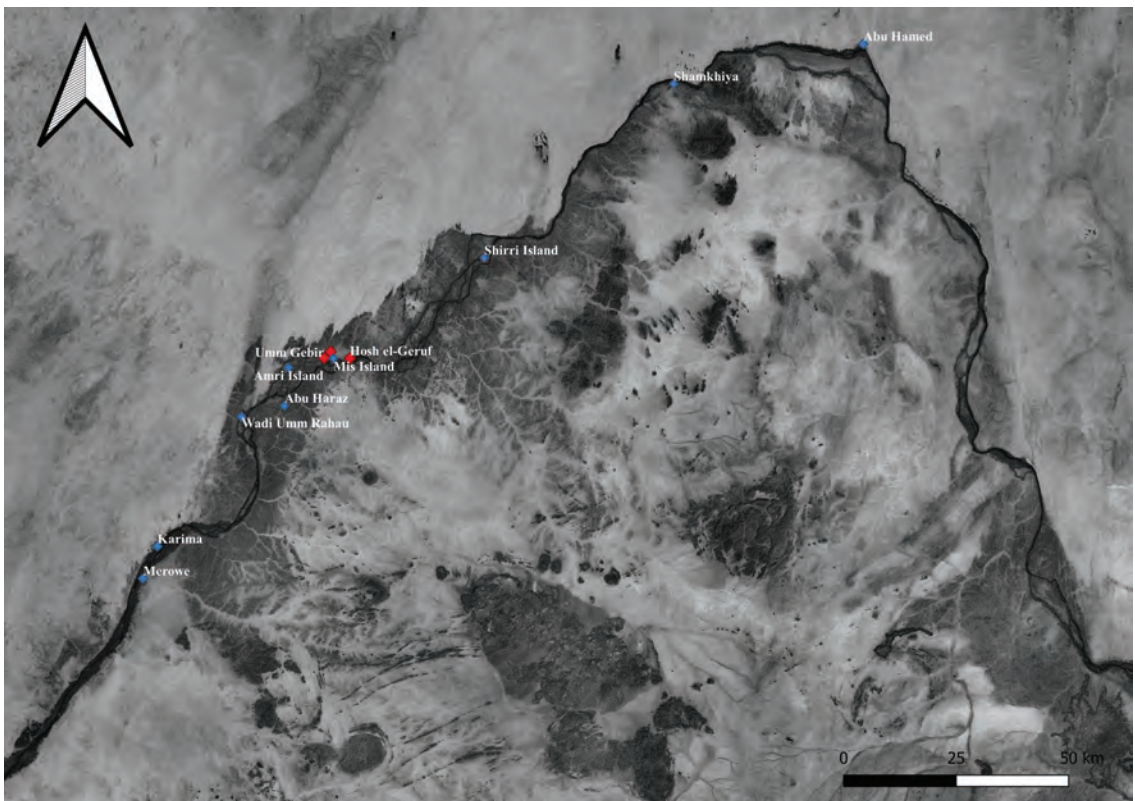


Figure 1. General map of the Fourth Cataract. ISAC Nubian Expedition sites are in red. Created by Adrian Chlebowski.

not fully a part of the Kerman kingdom of Kush but did combine elements of the many social groups from nearby regions. In fact, there is evidence of significant cultural interconnections that reach as far as Lower Nubia and Egypt to the north and almost to the Ethiopian border at the southeast.

The strongest of these relationships, in pottery vessels and grave architecture, are with the Pan Grave culture of Lower Nubia and Upper Egypt. This group can be identified with the Medjay, prominent in contemporary Egyptian hieroglyphic documents, especially the execration texts found at Elephantine and various sites in Nubia.

HOSH EL-GERUF

A manuscript on the gold-processing site of Hosh el-Geruf is in preparation. Work at the site consisted of surface collection units and excavation units distributed over the area (fig. 2). A site that large could not be completely excavated, especially in one season, though enough data was acquired to suggest its identification as a gold-processing site in various periods.

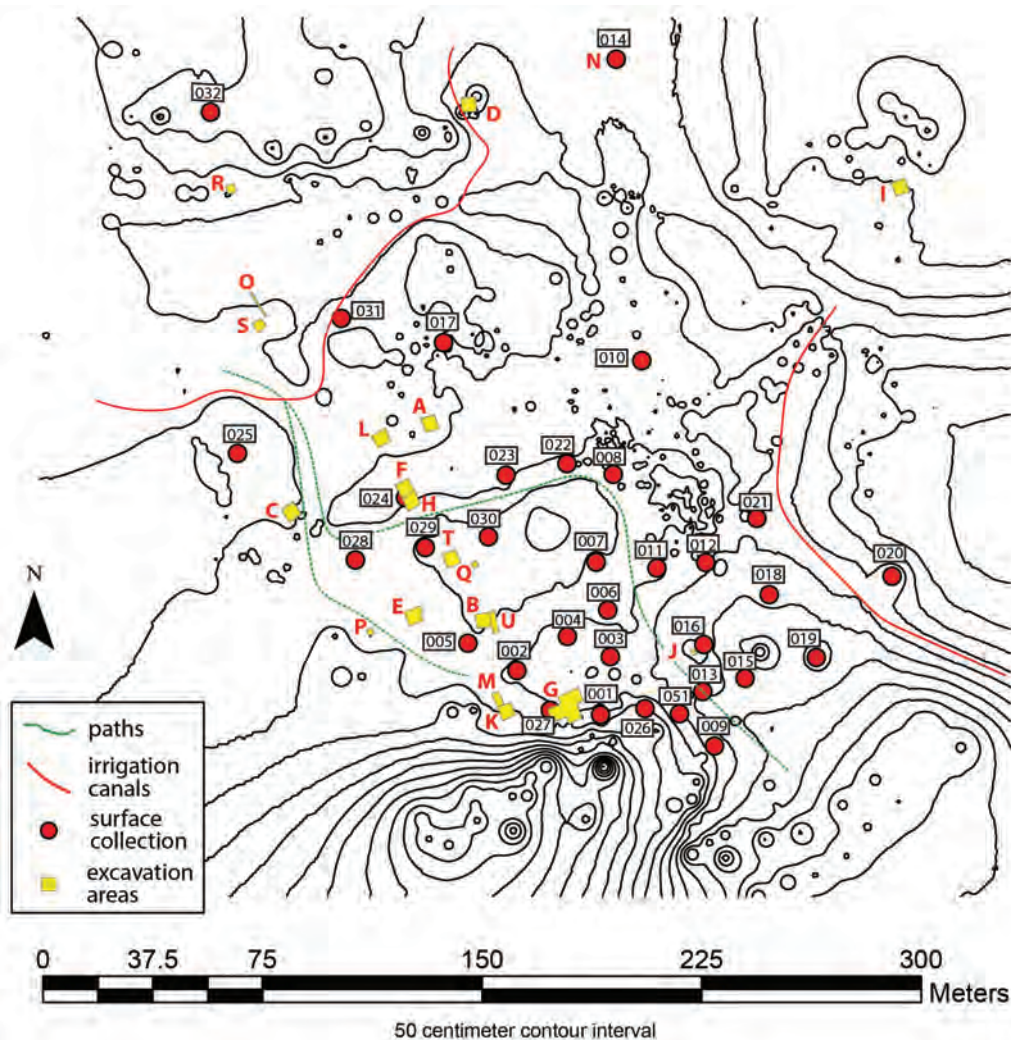


Figure 2. Plan of Hosh el-Geruf. Based on a plan by Adrian Chlebowski.

Apart from equipment used to grind and pulverize fragments of ore, most of the finds were pottery sherds. Although bagged according to site and locus, these sherds were not entered into a registered database until Lisa Heidorn undertook the massive task in 2021–22 as an essential precursor to writing the report. At the same time and thereafter, she and Carol Meyer undertook a program of drawing pottery, which had not been done in the field, while Larry Lissak photographed the sherds. Some of the latter had been photographed in the field, but often in harsh light from uncontrolled angles. These projects were essential to writing the manuscript and preparing the plates, tasks now nearing completion. In the meantime, studies of the geology and the industrial equipment were prepared by James Harrell and Carol Meyer (fig. 3). As part of the general study of the site, which aroused considerable interest in the media (Wilford 2007), Bruce Williams participated in a lecture series of the Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich; his lecture has now been published as an article in a volume on landscape and resource management in Bronze Age Nubia (Williams 2024).

Although of great importance, as attested by its inclusion in the lecture series, Hosh el-Geruf was a frustrating site to excavate. No real evidence of any coherent structure was found in any area excavated or surveyed. While there were concentrated deposits of stones and burned mud debris, none of it was organized in a recognizably intentional pattern despite the copious evidence of industrial activity (fig. 4). The nature of that activity was clear, however, and it was on a scale not found elsewhere in the Fourth Cataract region.

Figure 3. James Harrell and Carol Meyer at Hosh el-Geruf in 2007.

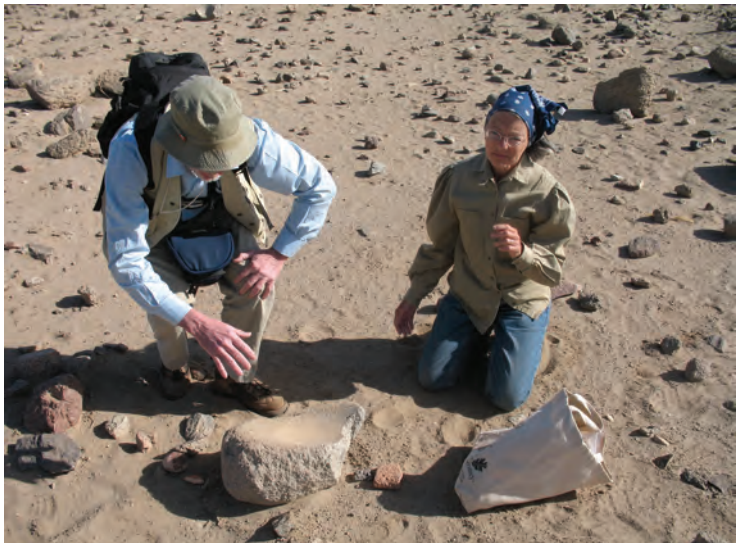


Figure 4. Area D with evidence of burning.



Three major phases of activity were found at Hosh el-Geruf. The earliest one, which predated the industry, belonged to the Late Mesolithic and Neolithic periods. Clear traces of it were the copious potsherds at the surface and in layers down to the bedrock (fig. 5). Numerous Neolithic bowls and other vessels were found, as well as a handful of objects (fig. 6).

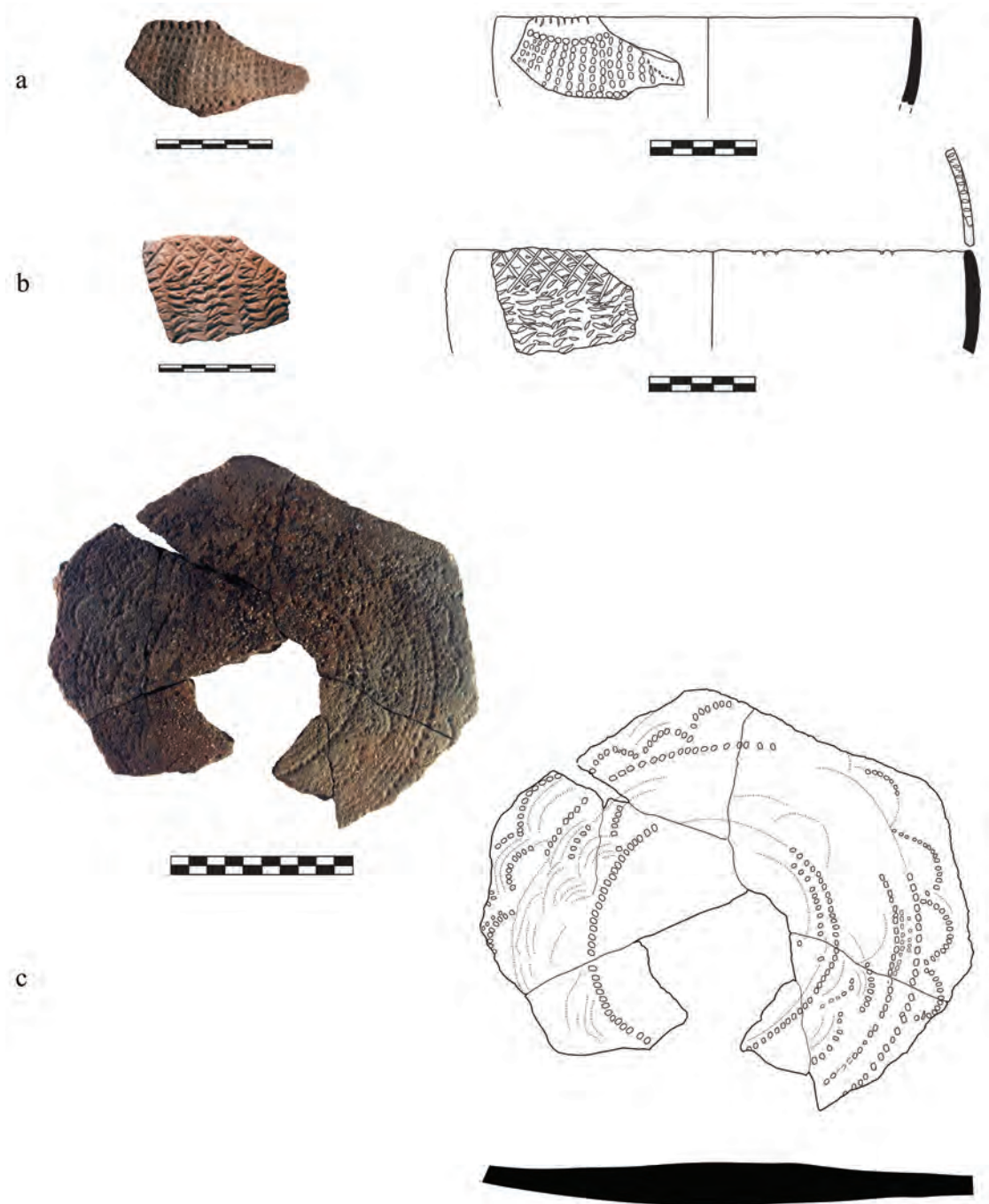


Figure 5. Late Mesolithic pottery: a, 2022.593a, SC004; b, 222.593b, SC004; c, 2022.533, B1.

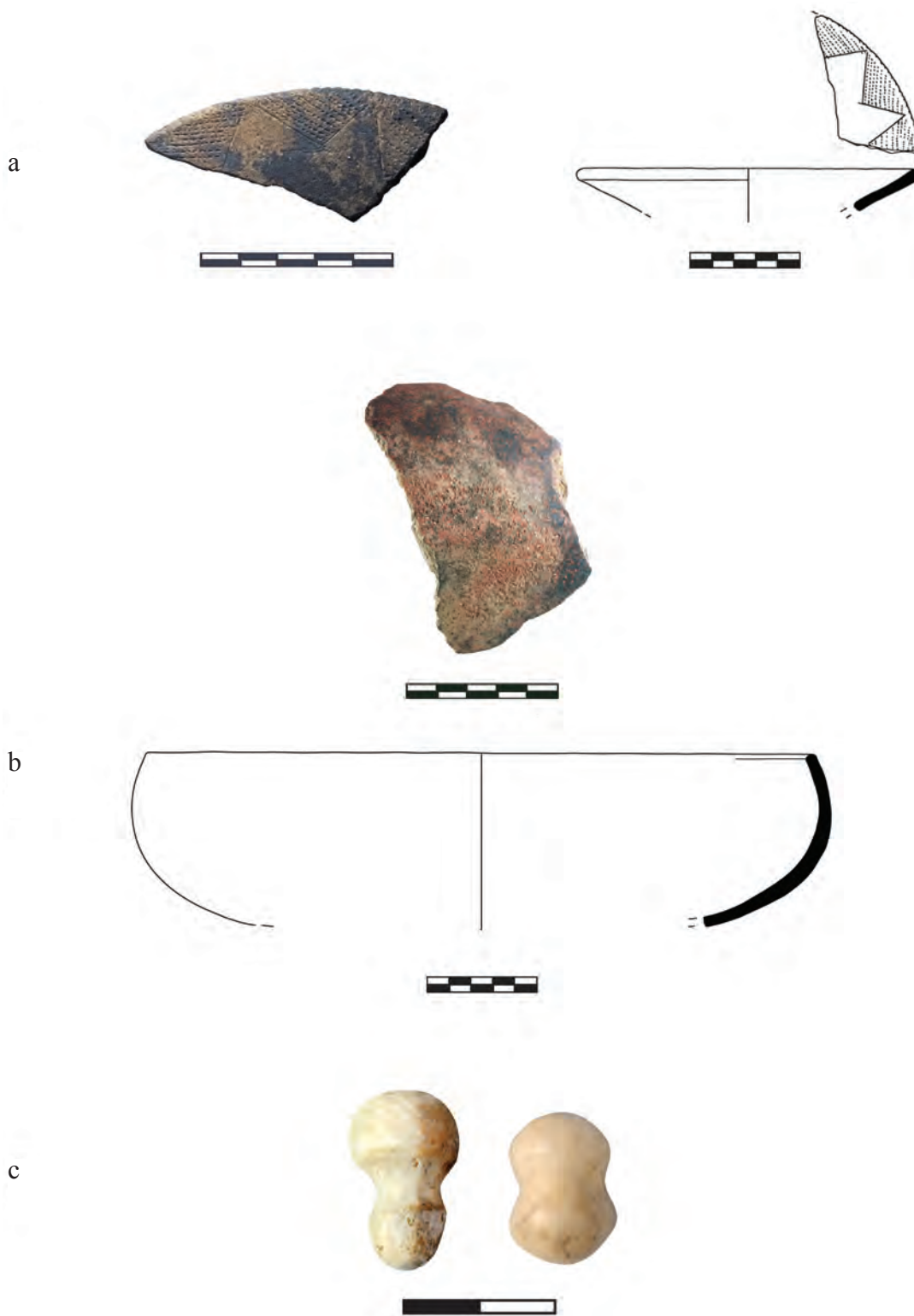


Figure 6. Neolithic pottery: a, 2022.092, G3; b, 2022.492, G3; c, stone jewelry studs from loci in Area G (2007.015, G1; 2007.014, G11).

OLD KUSH PERIOD AT HOSH EL-GERUF

After about 1800 BCE in the Old Kush period, pottery was deposited at the site, and numerous grindstone bases, upper stones, and round quartz pounders were also made and deposited there (fig. 7). This complex lasted for about 150 years. Remarkably, there is no sign of mining at the site, and none was detected nearby. Neither the long gashes made by hard-rock gold mining in the region nor systematic pitting in the areas between outcrops were found. Such pits were made to recover small pieces of gold-bearing quartz that are weathered and fractured out of the deposit as the granitic gneiss deteriorates. Although some pits were found in mudbanks on a nearby island, with no evidence for secure dating, they were not numerous enough to support such a large-scale industry as that found at Hosh el-Geruf. However, on the island of Sherari, much farther upstream in the cataract, an expedition from Humboldt University in Berlin found thousands of pits systematically filling spaces between outcrops. Nearby were two Old Kush cemeteries. Since no processing site comparable to Hosh el-Geruf was found anywhere else in the cataract region, it seems clear that gold-bearing quartz was mined at Sherari and shipped downstream in boats to Hosh el-Geruf to be ground and pulverized, and probably washed at the riverbank nearby. Figuring out why this processing was done separately from mining is a matter of surmise. It may have been that the logistics at Hosh el-Geruf were easier and that the site was also easier to secure, because gold was as highly valuable then as it is now. Only a little gold was found at sites in the cataract, including some simple beads from the cemetery at al-Widay I. Another challenging feature of the situation is that there is no archaeological sign of a state authority of the type so visible at contemporary Kerma. Burials at al-Widay reflect a certain prosperity, but not the monumental social and economic disparities found at Kerma. One is reminded, however, of the regional powers farther north that were mentioned in Old Kingdom records, notably such places as Irtjet and Wawat mentioned in the autobiography of Harkhuf. The latter, at least, was occupied by the C-Group culture, which likewise displayed no substantial disparities in wealth although Wawat had its own ruler.



Figure 7. Large, deep grinding stones.

About the same time the al-Widay cemetery ended, roughly 1600 BCE, Hosh el-Geruf was abandoned. Activity resumed eight or nine centuries later, however, and apparently as strongly as before, to judge from the amount of sherd material found (fig. 8). It was then under the control of the Kushite Twenty-Fifth Dynasty at Napata, and a sealing of Queen Khensa, sister-wife of King Piankhy, was deposited there. After a short time, the site was abandoned once more, and only a few sherds from later periods were found.

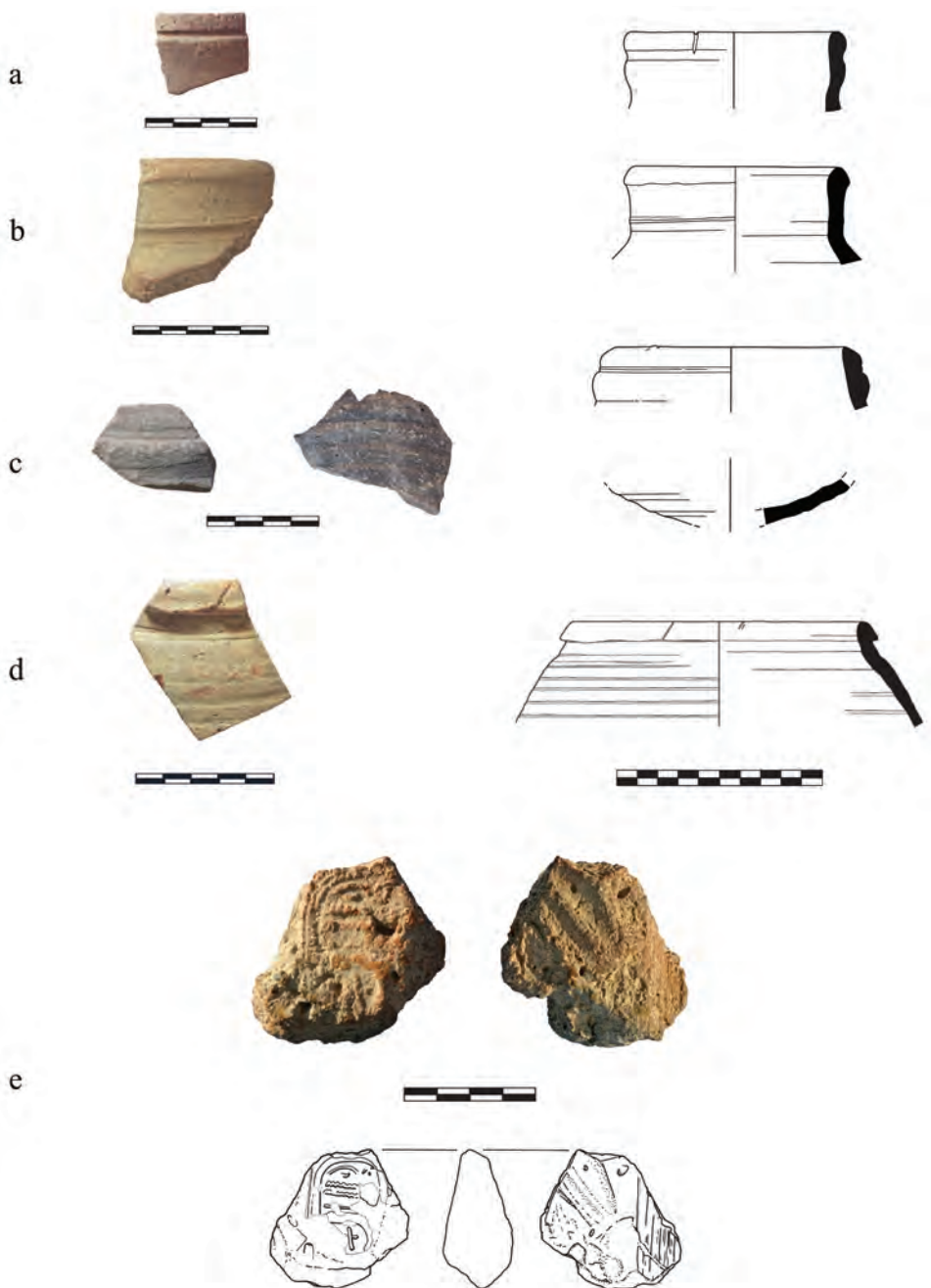


Figure 8. Napatan pottery and sealing of Queen Khensa: *a*, 2022.209, U1 (silt); *b*, 2022.988, SC051 (silt); *c*, 2022.165, M1 (burned marl); *d*, 2022.806, SC005 (marl); *e*, mud sealing of Khensa (2007.011, SC024).

The scale and complexity of the gold industry in the Fourth Cataract is something of an object lesson in understanding the complexity of human action from archaeological remains. We are often surprised in archaeology, especially when the results do not match widely recognized templates.

The Nubian Expedition volume on al-Widay was submitted to the ISAC publications office in June 2024 and is now being considered for possible external review. Meanwhile, we continue to work on the manuscript and plates for the Hosh el-Geruf publication. We tentatively expect to submit the Hosh el-Geruf volume to the publications office in 2025.

A significant contribution to the understanding of Christian-period Serra East, the volumes on which have been approved for publication by ISAC, is an article by Tasha Vorderstrasse in *Nubia Cristiana II*, edited by Magdalena Łaptaś and Stefan Jakobielsky, now available online. More details appear in Vorderstrasse's individual research contribution in this annual report.

The work of the ISAC Nubian Expedition Publication Project on the excavations in the Fourth Cataract has been generously supported by grants from the Shelby White and Leon Levy Program for Archaeological Publications and the National Endowment for the Humanities Collaborative Research Program.

Finally, we note with great sorrow the passing of Mahmoud el-Tayeb, who had a major career in Sudan and Warsaw as a scholar of Nubian archaeology and who was a leading participant in the Gdansk mission to the Fourth Cataract (Obluski 2024). He provided significant aid to the Nubian Expedition from Chicago during its years of fieldwork from 2006 to 2008. Most important, he was a great friend to us all.

REFERENCES

Obluski, Artur

- 2024 "Mahmoud El-Tayeb (1957–2024)." Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw, June 19. <https://pcma.uw.edu.pl/en/2024/06/19/mahmoud-el-tayeb-1957-2024-a-memory-by-artur-obluski/>.

Wilford, John Noble

- 2007 "Scholars Race to Recover a Lost Kingdom on the Nile." *New York Times*, June 19. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/19/science/19kush.html>.

Williams, Bruce

- 2024 "Hosh el-Geruf, a Gold-Processing Centre in the Fourth Cataract of the Nile." In *Landscape and Resource Management in Bronze Age Nubia: Archaeological Perspectives on the Exploitation of Natural Resources and the Circulation of Commodities in the Middle Nile*, edited by Julia Budka and Rennan Lemmos, 65–83. Contributions to the Archaeology of Egypt, Nubia and the Levant 17. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.