

Excavations at Semna South, First Season 1966/67

LOUIS V. ŽABKAR, FIELD DIRECTOR

During the 1966/67 season the Oriental Institute Expedition to Sudanese Nubia began excavation of a pharaonic fortress and an adjacent cemetery at Semna South, fifty miles south of Wadi Halfa.

Less than a mile from the greater fortress of Semna West with which it seems to have been connected by means of a wall or walls, the fort at Semna South is built on flat ground and on a square plan. Its fortifications consist of a large stone glacis, a ditch, and then a buttressed girdle wall separated from the ditch by a wide berm. The area enclosed within the girdle wall is quite small, some 35 meters square.

A stairway of massive stones, its upper part protected on each side by stone masonry, descends from the northwest corner of the inner area of the fort and tunnels under the glacis to what was then the water's edge.

A bronze cup engraved with lotus flower buds from Semna South, Ptolemaic period.



At the base of the northern glacis, silt has accumulated to a height of several meters, indicating that the Nile level rose subsequent to the building of the fortress. The effect of this higher Nile level was also observed within the excavated part of the ditch, where, in the accumulated silt, sherds of New Kingdom pottery were found. Although this higher Nile level may well have been a local phenomenon, it may also necessitate a re-examination of the opinion that since the Middle Kingdom the Nile level has gradually receded.

The course of a reveted bank which connects the south corner of the fort with a near hill terrace has been established. The apparent lowness of this wall and its relatively weak construction would indicate that the wall was not meant for defensive purposes. These characteristics of the wall, together with traces of temporary human habitation within the area enclosed by the wall and the southern glacis of the fort, would rather indicate that the area so enclosed—an annex, as it were, to the fort of Semna South—may have served as a depot, a commercial exchange base, or a temporary human settlement or camp. This complex character of Semna South, that is, fort proper with annex, or possibly annexes, will need to be kept in mind when evaluating its function in the system of Second Cataract fortifications.

The excavation of the cemetery established the predominant occurrence of Meroitic tombs but also revealed—as is frequently the case in Nubian cemeteries—that within the same area tombs belonging to the X-group and, to a smaller extent, to the Christian period, are present.

Although relatively few tombs have been found intact, some significant finds have been recovered. Among these are bronze and copper vessels, toilet equipment, beadwork of various types, and some unusual foreign imports, such as a bronze cup engraved with lotus flowerbuds (see photo), and a glass ointment jar. The pottery is represented by a few complete “biscuit”-ware cups, bottles naturalistically decorated with floral and animal designs, some large well-made utility ware, and pottery fashioned in imitation of foreign imports that came to Nubia from or through Egypt.

From the some three hundred and fifty graves excavated have come the remains of about four hundred and fifty individuals. Preliminary measurements and records of these remains have been made, and samples of hair and

tissue have been secured. The remains have been cleaned and stored in numbered bags for further measurement.

In spite of the fact that the cemetery has been plundered in both ancient and modern times, the funerary gifts recovered from the graves, the layout of the mastaba-type tombs, and the presence of foreign imports and their imitations give the impression that the Meroitic community at Semna South was not only large in number but that it had a standard of living which favorably compares with other Meroitic communities in the region of the Second Cataract and that it maintained trade relations with Greco-Roman Egypt.

The staff at Semna South consisted of the following members: the Field Director; Dr. Ronald J. Williams, Senior Field Egyptologist; Mrs. Ronald Williams, House Manager; Mr. Gerhard Haeny, Architect; Miss Joan Karaganis, Anatomical Recorder; Mr. John Callender, Field Archeologist; Mr. John R. French, Photographer; Mrs. John French, Workroom Assistant; Mr. Stephano Bianca, Second Architect; and Mr. Ibrahim Salama Hassan, Paymaster, Mechanic and Driver.

Bottles decorated with floral and animal designs, Meroitic period.

