

The Oriental Institute Expedition to Sudanese Nubia

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Work on the records and finds of the two seasons, 1966/67 and 1967/68, from the Middle Kingdom fort and predominantly Meroitic cemetery at Semna South was begun this year in Chicago.

The most important feature of the fort was the remains of a rectangular Middle Kingdom building situated on the north side between the inner fortification walls and the outer walls. This Middle Kingdom house, with a kitchen (with storage jars and hearth place) and other, contiguously arranged rooms, was not, however, the earliest occupation level of that particular part of the fort. Beneath it a structure of quite a different nature was found: a mud-plastered pathway ran along the four walls enclosing an inner rectangle, the floor of which sloped from all sides toward a circular depression in the center

“Libation place” in the Middle Kingdom fort at Semna South



of which there was a basin. From the mid-point of each of the four sides of this rectangular structure, trough-like shallow channels, some paved with stone slabs and some with kiln-baked bricks, led to the basin. Structures of this type have been found in other Nubian forts and are usually referred to as "libation places."

Another unusual feature revealed by the excavation of the fort was a small, square, brick structure located at each of the four corners of the inner fortification walls. Two of these structures had not been plundered and contained foundation deposits consisting of some rough pottery bowls, small dishes, and a few faience beads.

The work in and around the church (with its "Sheikh's tomb") revealed that it was of the usual type with square haikal, which was later transformed into the type with apse and a passage between the two sacristies. Of the building which is still standing, only a small section of the walls and part of the two southern piers are original. The two northern piers were erected later and appear to have no connection with the church. And so it may well be that we have to attribute to the Moslem period the erection of the dome which remains as the dominant landmark of the Semna South site.

In the cemetery 534 graves were excavated during the two seasons. Two types of Meroitic graves occurred: a relatively elaborate and a simpler type. The former consists of a rectangular pit with a ledge supporting a leaning barrel vault of mud brick sometimes faced with plaster. The simpler tombs are of a variety of shapes, but two types occur most frequently: one consists of a ramp leading to a burial chamber, the door of which was blocked with brickwork and rough stone slabs; the second type consists of an oblong pit with a lateral chamber for burial which is on the north or the south side.

Almost all of the graves excavated had been disturbed and pillaged, although some significant objects were recovered from them: (1) a disk-shaped metal mirror with a center handle, which, together with an identical mirror also found at Semna South, seems to be a unique occurrence in Meroitic cemeteries in Egyptian and Sudanese Nubia, (2) a number of bronze bowls which represent one of the largest collections of metal vessels found in a Meroitic cemetery in Sudanese Nubia, and (3) four intact, naturalistically decorated, long-necked bottles, some of the rarest specimens of this type of Meroitic pottery.

In addition to these, a large collection of various pottery vessels, beads, necklaces, smaller metal objects, and the like were found in the graves.

From the 534 graves excavated at Semna South have come the remains of approximately 808 individuals: 753 Meroitic, 48 X-Group, and 7 Christian. Preliminary observations and measurements of these remains were made in the field. Almost all of the skulls (approximately 400) and vertebrae excavated as well as most of the adult long bones have been shipped to the Department of Anthropology of the University of Chicago, where they will be studied further with a particular emphasis on the investigation of any genetically distinctive features. Pathological bones and hair and tissue samples have also been sent to the Department of Anthropology for analysis.

But the most important finds came neither from the fort nor the cemetery, but from a dump outside the fort on its northwest side.

The dump was thickly covered with sherds of remarkably uniform types. A trench cut through one of its kom-like hillocks or piles of sherds revealed that it had been a dumping place for the fort during the Middle Kingdom. At a depth of 90 cm. of the trench a Twelfth Dynasty axe was found (see illustration) resting on a deposit of ashes.



Left: Metal mirror from a Meroitic grave of the 2nd or 3rd century after Christ at Semna South.

Right: Twelfth Dynasty axe from the dump near the fort at Semna South.

Of greatest interest among the discarded objects found in the dump was an unexpectedly large quantity of stamp seal impressions, official and private, decorated and inscribed. Among them were impressions of the hitherto only partially known name of the fort itself. In a well-known papyrus of the late Middle Kingdom found near the Ramesseum at Thebes there is a list of seventeen Egyptian fortresses,

eight of which belong to the Second Cataract region. The papyrus breaks off after the beginning of the name of the southernmost of the eight, but the seal impressions of Semna South now complete the name, "Repressing the Sety-Nubians." A proportionately large number of the Semna South seal impressions comprise sack or package sealings as well as door sealings; there are also some letter sealings with the imprint of the fibered surface of the papyrus to which they were attached.

The pottery, seal impressions, and other objects found in the dump will be of great help to us in our studies of the history of the fort of Semna South and its administrative affairs.

The staff at Semna South for the second season, February 1 to May 1, 1968, consisted of the Field Director, Mr. Gerhard Haeny, Architect (Swiss Institute, Cairo), Dr. Patricia Smith, Physical Anthropologist, Miss Joan J. Karaganis, Anatomical Recorder, Mr. Stefano Bianca, Second Architect, Mr. Ibrahim Salama Hassan, mechanic and driver.