

The Aswan area at the dawn of Egyptian history

Among recent discoveries made by the Aswan-Kom Ombo Archaeological Project those dated to the Predynastic and Early Dynastic Periods are particularly intriguing, revealing insights on the complexity of the rising Egyptian society at its southern frontier, as **Maria Carmela Gatto** reports.

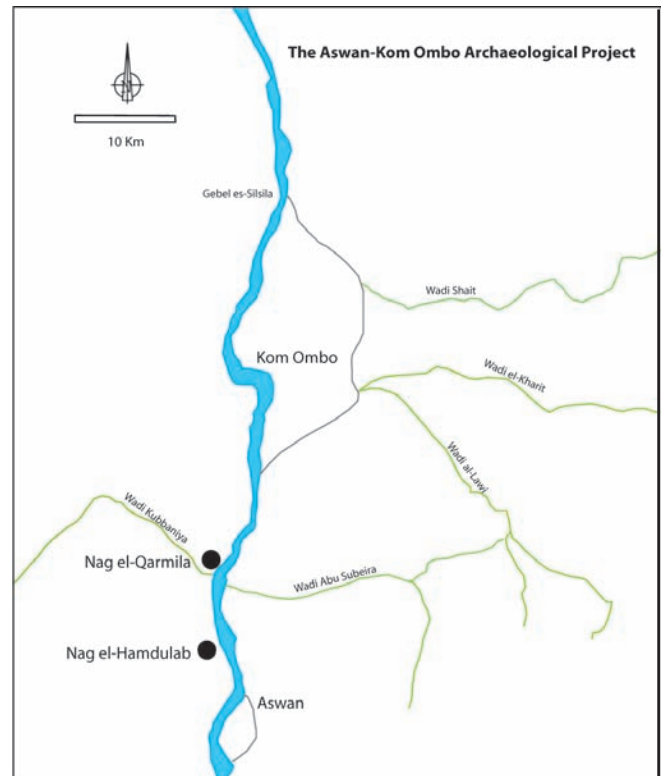
The First Cataract is the borderland between Egypt and Nubia. As might have been expected, and contrary to what the ancient Egyptians always wanted to show, the archaeological record found in the region highlights a stable and long-term presence of Nubian people. In the Predynastic Period Egyptians and Nubians were highly integrated and might even have created a sort of mixed culture, where the Nubian element was, however, less prominent than the Egyptian one.

A rescue excavation (due to pressure from modern overbuilding) of a Predynastic settlement and associated cemetery in Nag el-Qarmila, just north of Wadi Kubbaniya, is revealing this mixed cultural evidence (see also *EA* 30, pp.6-9). The settlement consists of a relatively small village heavily damaged by *sebakhin* activities and modern structures. It is located on the northern side of a small valley, partly placed on top of the Late Pleistocene Wild Nile deposit, and partly on sand connected with a sort of bay, which was formed by the summer Nile flooding in the inner part of the valley. The archaeological deposit found *in situ* is dated to N(aqada)IC-IIA (c.3700 BC) while a younger phase, dated to NIIC-III A2 (c.3600-3200), is found on the surface. The stratigraphy consists of superimposed seasonal occupation layers with hearths, postholes, *in-situ* pots, and plastered pits. For the NIC-IIA phase C14 dates (3800-3700 BC) fit perfectly with the pottery chronology. At the periphery of the village, towards the bay, the burial of an infant was found on the sand. Similar evidence was a common feature at other Predynastic sites, such as Adaima.

The cemetery currently under investigation is to the



The infant burial from the village of Nag el-Qarmila



Map of the Aswan-Kom Ombo region with the location of the two sites discussed in the text

north of the village. The graves are either placed on a fossil sand dune or dug into Middle Pleistocene alluvial deposits. Another cemetery is located to the south of the village and, based on visible surface remains, seems to be quite well preserved. Conversely, the northern cemetery has been plundered and all that remains of most of the burials placed on the sand is a scatter of bones and sherds. Only one grave has been found intact so far. The pits dug into the bedrock are either rounded or rectangular with rounded edges and the latter type is covered by stone slabs, a Nubian characteristic. Although already looted, important objects were collected in and around the graves. In particular we found many locally made Nubian vessels, as well as the fragment of a Nubian clay figurine. It is worth mentioning that these Nubian vessels are the only ones found in the Aswan area in almost a century of archaeological work and the northernmost found in Egypt.

It is in the material culture that the Nubian presence is



A grave, covered by stone slabs, in the northern cemetery at Nag el-Qarmila

most evident. Among the common Naqada lithic industry and ceramics, Nubian black-mouthed pottery is attested, with or without the rippled decoration, as well as small lunates made of quartz or agate. The latter were used in rows as the blades of sickles, as confirmed by the finding of a complete sickle at Khor Bahan. Also objects displaying elements of both traditions were noted, particularly some red polished Naqada bowls which have a Nubian milled rim decoration.

The amount of Nubian material recovered this season, in the area of the cemetery where pits are dug into the alluvial deposits, is definitely higher than before, suggesting that there might be locations in the cemetery and/or the village where Nubian material is clustered. Another peculiarity of these sites is the high percentage of shale-tempered wares in both domestic and funerary contexts. While such a production is commonly found in settlements such as Adaima and Hierakonpolis, it has



An Early A-Group pot from the Nag el-Qarmila cemetery



A Nubian sickle blade from the village of Nag el-Qarmila

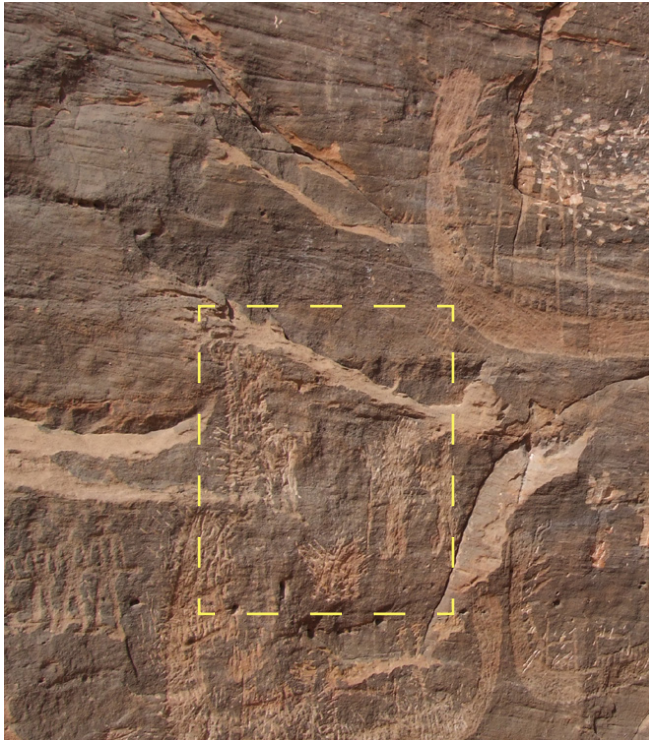
never been found in Upper Egyptian cemeteries.

If the archaeological record linked with daily life is bearing witness to an interaction between Nubians and Egyptians, the rock art tells another story. This kind of archaeological record is clearly connected with the elite at the time and thus represents the ideological aspect of the society, which is related to the Egyptian Naqada culture. Rock art is essentially used by the elite as a political manifesto.

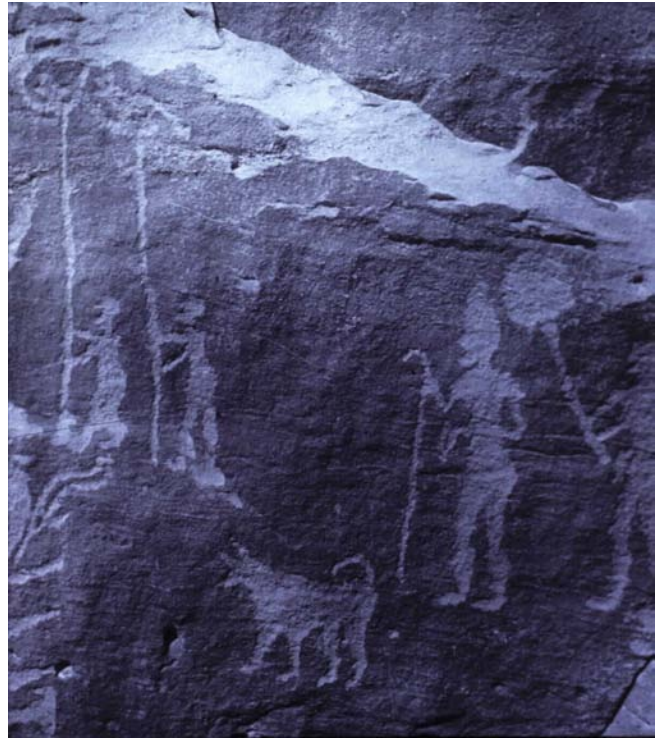
One of the most interesting rock art sites in the Aswan area was rediscovered in the November 2008 in a valley behind the village of Nag el-Hamdulab, in Gharb Aswan. It consists of a series of rock drawings which goes back to the end of Dynasty 0. The valley is a kind of amphitheatre with the main entrance located towards the Nile and three outlets, connecting it with the desert and with the Qubbet el-Hawa, to the north, west and south. Most of the rock drawings are in open-air locations and visible from a



The valley of Nag el-Qarmila: in the foreground is the excavation of the northern cemetery; in the background the excavation of the village



Detail of the main scene at locality NH1 (below) showing (outlined) the current state of the area which has been damaged since it was photographed in the twentieth century



The undated photograph, found among the papers of the late Labib Habachi, of the undamaged scene at locality NH1 (published by Hendrickx, Swelim, Raffaele, Eyckerman and Friedman, Archéo-Nil 2009)



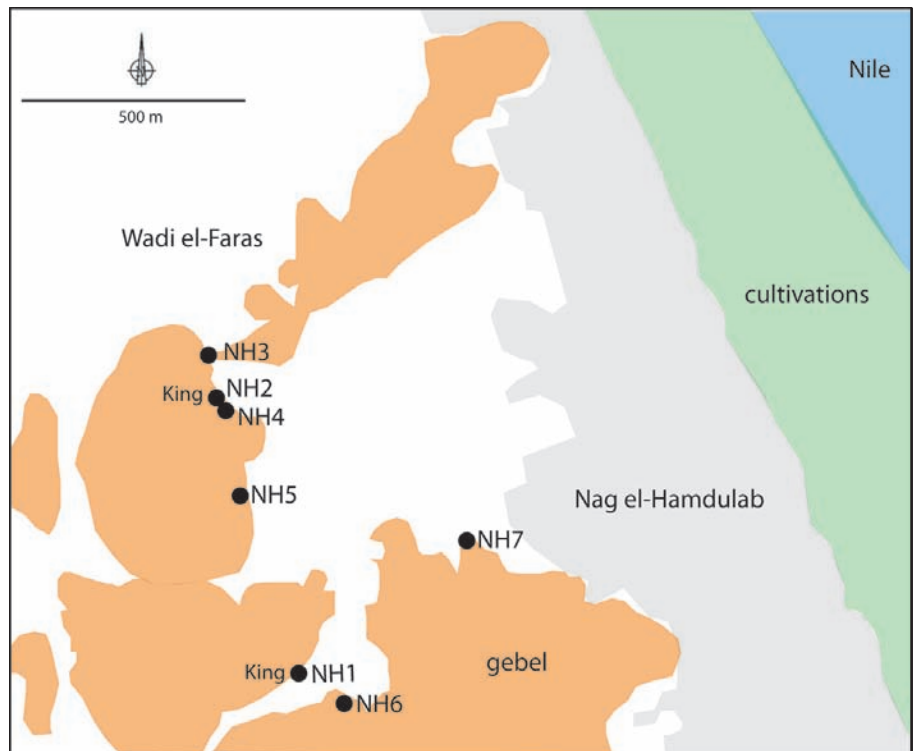
The main scene at locality NH1

Map of the Nag el-Hamdulab site with the location of the rock drawings: in localities NH1 and NH2 a king with the white crown is represented

distance, apart the main tableau that instead is hidden. Clearly the natural space chosen had a ritual meaning in the context of the rock drawings.

The rock art tableaux are all part of the same ideological concept. They represent scenes where bulls are controlled or captured by dogs and humans, and processions of boats, the latter with archers and captives in association. A king with the white crown is shown standing on top of one of those boats (locality NH2). The main tableau (locality NH1) represents a procession of boats, the first of which is towed by four men, superintended by the king, who is accompanied by two standard bearers, one fan bearer and a dog.

Unfortunately, the main tableau has been partly damaged (see opposite) and the metal objects used to do this were found on site. Luckily, for the section showing the king, we can rely on an old photograph which was the property of the late Labib Habachi. The main scene had in fact been discovered at the end of the nineteenth century by Sayce and published by de Morgan, and was rediscovered by Habachi who, unfortunately never had the chance to



The king on a boat at locality NH2



A boat with human figures from Nag el-Hamdulab

publish it. Stan Hendrickx and other colleagues have now published the photograph, and thanks to this new interest on Habachi's lost rock art site, the scene was relocated. Some of the rock drawings were discovered in recent years by the QuarryScapes project, which is also working in the area (see *EA* 34, pp.33-36).

Remarkable similarities can be noted between the Nag el-Hamdulab tableaux and the Scorpion mace-head, the Narmer mace-head and the Narmer palette. Many similar ritual scenes are also found in the desert stretching behind Armant and Naqada, in the Wadi Hammamat, and in Lower Nubia, with the most famous being at Gebel Sheikh Suleiman. They are interpreted by John Darnell as representations of the Jubilee Cycle: a manifesto of the royal power. Thus, more than celebrations of real historical events, those scenes are the ritualization of the celebration of those events.

It is only with a comprehensive study of all aspects of Predynastic and Early Dynastic society in the region – settlements, cemeteries and rock art – that our understanding of the Aswan region at this formative period in Nubian and Egyptian history will be complete.

□ Maria Carmela Gatto is the director of the Aswan-Kom Ombo Archaeological Project, a joint venture between Yale University and University of Rome 'La Sapienza'. The 2008-09 fieldwork at Nag el-Qarmila and Nag el-Hamdulab was funded by Yale University, the University of Bologna, the Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek – Vlaanderen, the University of Rome 'La Sapienza' and the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo. John Darnell and Stan Hendrickx are responsible for the study and interpretation of the Nag el-Hamdulab rock art site; the Nubian evidence in Nag el-Qarmila is under study by Hans-Åke Nordström, Donatella Usai and the writer. Articles about the two sites are published in *Archéo-Nil* 19 and *Sahara* 2009. Photographs: the Aswan-Kom Ombo Archaeological Project, except the Habachi photograph which is reproduced courtesy of Stan Hendrickx and Nabil Swelim.