

## Scheme to redact the Research Project

### PHD IN ASIAN, AFRICAN AND MEDITERRANEAN STUDIES

#### 1 – Title of Research Project

Continuity and change in ceramic production of the Islamic period in the Middle Nile valley. The cases of Sennar and Al Khandaq

#### 2 - Scientific-disciplinary sector to which the project refers

Archaeology; Nubian Studies

#### 3 - Project abstract (max 5000 characters - one page)

The study of ceramics is regarded as crucial in archaeology as a proper classification of ceramics can contribute to the definition of archaeological cultures. Despite ceramic studies are traditionally an important part of Nubian and Sudanese archaeology, their development is far from satisfactory for some specific phases and regions. The “Islamic” period, i.e. the phase started after the end of the cultures related to the Christian Nubian kingdoms, is certainly one of these, in a general panorama in which also the material remains of that phase were largely overlooked by scholars. The aim of this research work is precisely to contribute to start filling this gap in our knowledge, with the study of the ceramic materials collected by the ongoing research activities of University of Khartoum at the two sites of Sennar on the Blue Nile and El Khandaq in Upper Nubia. The ceramic typology of these two sites will be reconstructed on the basis of undisturbed assemblages. A ceramic sequence for the two sites, pointing out the main developments in the ceramic productions, continuity and changes, will be outlined thanks to the dating elements associated with the undisturbed contexts. As ceramics may also provide insights into the social and economic history of ancient people, being related to crucial functions, such as domestic activities and particularly food production and consumption, as well as to exchanges and long distance networks, special attention will be paid to these aspects. In this way ceramics studies will contribute to a better knowledge of the socio-economic processes characterizing the two sites as well as, in general, the “Islamic” period in Sudan.

#### 4 - State of the art (max 5000 characters - one page)

In the title of the project and in the abstract I put the term Islamic into quotations marks. This is because of several reasons. First, to fix a date for the adoption of a religious faith in a region may be hazardous even when, like in our case, written sources are available. Indeed, the adoption of a religious faith may have been a complex process lasting for several centuries and affecting in various moments the different components of society, as it was shown in the case of the adoption of Christianity in Nubia and Sudan by David Edwards. In addition to that, to relate material culture, like in our case pottery, to a specific religious faith is always complex and daredevil. Moreover, the adoption of Islam started and ended in different moment in the different regions of Sudan. For

all these reasons, the duration and even the beginning of the “Islamic” period should be regarded as highly variable. To set the scene, it is therefore necessary to specify here what by “Islamic” archaeology is meant. I include in this the material culture produced after the end of the well distinct archaeological cultures characterizing the sites of the Middle Nile valley in the period of the formation, flourishing and decline of the three kingdoms of Nobadia, Makuria and Alwa. The end of these cultures of course took place in moments variable from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE in the different regions. The material culture of the Middle Nile valley in the period related to the above mentioned kingdoms was labelled as Post-Meroitic in its earliest phases and Christian in the later phases and is characterized by an high degree of regional variability. This is the cultural background from which the “Islamic” archaeological cultures emerged. The end of these cultures may be conventionally fixed at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, marked by the end of the Funj kingdom and the Turkish occupation of the Middle Nile valley. Therefore, provided these chronological limits, the term “Islamic” will be adopted here as a general chrono-cultural label, until more suitable terms also related to the definition of specific regional or local cultural traditions will be available thanks to the progress in the archaeological study of that phase.

Noteworthy, if the Post-Meroitic and Christian material culture was a subject dealt with by several scholars, the following Islamic phases were largely overlooked. On one side, traditionally the attention of the scholars was focusing up to the Sixties mainly on the pre- and protohistoric phases and on the Napatan and Meroitic periods, on the other side, also after the last Nubian salvage campaign, the Islamic archaeology remained a marginal issue in Sudanese archaeology.

Only in few Lower Nubian sites the post-Christian levels were thoroughly investigated, mainly thanks to the efforts of W.Y. Adams, who carefully recorded post-Christian materials and structures at Kulubnarti. The same scholar with John Alexander also investigated even later remains going back to the Ottoman period at Qasr Ibrim. Indeed, these are the only systematic publications of ceramic assemblages dating to Islamic period in the Middle Nile valley. The data collected in those sites were also exploited by W.Y Adams in his seminal contribution on the Medieval Nubian pottery, which nevertheless does not deal with phases subsequent the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Moreover, it should be stressed both Kulubnarti and Qasr Ibrim are Lower Nubian sites, therefore our knowledge of the ceramics of the Islamic phase is for the moment limited to that region. The only notable geographic exception lays outside the Nile valley and is represented by the recent publication of the typology of the ceramics from the Gergaf Group sites of Eastern Sudan, dating to the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century CE. Indeed, several research activities centred on this phase took place in the deserts East of the valley: there settlements related to the exploitation of the gold mines and funerary areas often characterized by qubba structures and Arabic inscriptions were recorded. Other investigations were conducted on the Red Sea coast, at Suakin, Ahidab and Badia, where remains of settlements related to ports and harbours were partially investigated. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that also in these cases, as far as material culture is concerned, the locally made pottery remained largely unnoticed, while some insights were provided on the imported wares from Egypt, the Near East and China, not only for their chronological importance, but also for their relevance in showing the involvement of these Red Sea coastal sites in long-distance exchange networks.

Therefore, systematic studies on the material culture going back to the Islamic period are indeed needed, and this is especially true for Upper Nubia, the Butana and the Gezira. This project is aimed at contributing to fill this gap with the systematic study of ceramic materials from two sites going back to this phase precisely located in those regions.

5 - Bibliography (max 5000 characters - one page)

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6 - Project description (max 15000 characters - three pages) and indicate only one of the three Curricula for PhD Asia Africa e Mediterraneo

The project is submitted for evaluation for the archaeological curriculum of the PhD program in African, Asian and Mediterranean Studies

The project consists of the study of the ceramic materials from undisturbed contexts investigated by the University of Khartoum at Sennar and Al Khandaq. The two sites were selected for several reasons. First, these are two major archaeological sites of the Islamic phase currently under investigation, and therefore whose materials were collected in systematic and accurate fieldwork, following standardized procedures. Second, Sennar and Al Khandaq are respectively located on the Blue Nile and in Upper Nubia, i.e. in regions South of Lower Nubia, which, as previously mentioned, is the only area of the Middle Nile valley where studies on the Islamic ceramic materials were conducted so far. Therefore, the ceramic assemblages from Sennar and Al Khandaq promise to provide crucial insights into regional ceramic traditions of the Islamic period which were so far completely overlooked by the scholars.

The access to the ceramic materials from the two sites is granted for the present project by the University of Khartoum, whose team working in both sites I am a member.

The ceramic materials from undisturbed contexts from Sennar and Al Khandaq will be described following an attribute system based on the registration of the dimensions, identification and description of the shape, description of the surface treatment and colour, decorations and fabric. In the present stage of the research the fabrics will be described only on a macroscopic bases, but first attempts of mineralogical and chemical characterizations will be performed if there will be the possibility. In such a case, a number of sherds will be sampled and submitted for analysis on the basis of the macroscopic appearance of their fabric.

All the information will be recorded in a digital database, where also the context where each fragment was collected will be registered.

A special attention in the description phase will be given to the traces left during the production process of the ceramics, that may provide insights into the production process itself. Moreover, the traces of use will be recorded, as well traces of wear, which can be relevant to be considered together with the shape of the vessel for suggesting its function.

As far as the graphic record of the materials is concerned, a picture will be taken of each relevant sherd (i.e. fragment of rim, of the base, handles, decorated sherd, sherds with traces left by the production process, of use or wear). The profile of the sherds will be drawn. The pictures of each fragment will be stored in the same database also containing their description.

The analysis of the data will be performed both on the basis of a qualitative and quantitative approach. The diachronic and synchronic changes in the ceramic distribution will be pointed out by means of diagrams and charts, as well as distribution maps. In the discussion of the noted changes and discontinuities, the contextual data related to the structures and associated materials will be taken into consideration for each assemblage, in order to identify the differences among assemblages which could be related to functional factors.

A relevant part of the analysis will consist in the comparison of the single sherds and ceramic assemblages with the ones from other sites of the same period, although the published studies on the pottery form Islamic Sudanese sites are very scanty (see above "State of Art"). This would point out relations ceramic traditions of different sites if not proper imports from other regions. Moreover, the occurrence of imported materials from Egypt, the Near and the Far East will be noted as well, because of the potential contribution of these materials for establishing the absolute chronology of some ceramic assemblages in the Middle Nile (cross-dating), and also to point out the involvement of the sites in the Middle Nile in long-distance exchanges. Such a kind of involvement may be a relevant factor to be considered in studying the local ceramic production, as well as the socio-economic processes taking place in the Islamic phase in the Middle Nile valley.

The description of the materials will be mainly conducted in the field, as I am a team member of both the expeditions working at Sennar and Al Khandaq, in the storerooms of the two expeditions of the University of Khartoum. Nevertheless, some samples or assemblages may be exported to Italy for closer laboratory analysis if needed. The data processing and analysis will take place in Italy, because in those phases a more direct and continuous interaction with the tutors and access to libraries and online resources will be needed.

The data collection will take place in the first two years of the PhD course. In the second year, the writing process will start from the chapters describing the contexts and the methodology adopted in the study. The chapter containing the general description of the materials and the catalogue will be written at the beginning of the third year, while the analysis of the data will be performed in the

third year of the project, In the second half of the third year of the project the conclusions will be written.

#### 7 - Expected results and application effects (max 3000 characters - half page)

The results of the project are expected to be twofold. On one side, the systematic study of the ceramics from Al Khandaq and Sennar and of their diachronic changes will provide for the first time a reference sequence for Upper Nubia and the Blue Nile regions. These two sequences promise to be not only useful for proposing an archaeological periodisation of the long and so far indistinct Islamic phase in both regions, but also as a basic reference tool to be used in field work in the sites of both areas. The systematic record of all the traces left on the pottery during the production processes, will throw light for the first time on the ceramic production technology adopted in the Islamic Middle Nile valley. The systematic record of the traces of wear and use together with the study of the shape of the different vessels will contribute to understand their function. Moreover, the study of the distribution of the ceramics in the investigated sectors of both sites will also provide interesting insights into the function of the vessels based on the contextual association with other finds and specific structures.

The comparison with the well known earlier Christian ceramic traditions of both regions will allow to asses if the socio-economic and ideological changes affecting both areas with the end of the Christian kingdoms and the adoption of Islam were somehow reflected also in the ceramics or if, on the contrary, local ceramic traditions were characterized by a stronger continuity. In this respect, it will be interesting to discover if the new religious faith was somehow affecting the everyday activities, like food preparation and consumption, in which the ceramics were used, or not.

Finally, the comparison between the ceramic finds and traditions of Al Khandaq and Sennar with the ones from Lower Nubia, and the identification of imports from Egypt, the Near and Far East will point out the involvement of the two sites in regional and interregional networks of relations.

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