Site E-92-8: A Late Prehistoric C-Group Component at Nabta Playa

by Alex Applegate and Nieves Zedeño

INTRODUCTION

A majority of the sites at Nabta Playa belongs to Neolithic periods that are described in detail elsewhere in this volume. A more recent settlement, the C-Group, was also present, appearing almost ephemeral in comparison to the scale of the preceding occupations.

The agropastoral C-Group, a poorly understood and understudied culture, was first defined by Reisner (1910) based on a group of sites that shared similarities in ceramics and other artifacts. These sites were located in the lower Nubian Nile Valley, from around Aswan south to beyond the Second Cataract. Since the C-Group was first defined, ceramics of this entity have been found to the east of the Valley in the Red Sea hills, and also in the Western Desert (Arkell 1961:49-53). Through finds of datable Egyptian artifacts in C-Group sites, and visa versa, the C-Group period has been cross-dated to ca. 2100 BC to 1500 BC (Anderson 1996; Sadr 1991).

At Nabta, this period is known only at E-92-8, a three-roomed structure resting against a high table-rock outcrop of Nubian sandstone some 470 m to the west of Site E-92-9, the calendar circle (Figure 2.1). Site E-92-8 appears to have a long and complex history of construction, occupation and modification and its existence provides interesting ecological implications for the region.

The structure is made of hundreds of Nubian sandstone slabs and blocks that have been piled both horizontally and set upright to form three circular rooms (Figure 19.1). Two rooms abut directly against the outcrop (Figure 19.2). These rooms enclose an area of 13.5 m² for the West Room and 7.5 m² for the East Room. The third room (the South Room) is built against the southern walls of these two rooms and it measures an approximate 9 m² (Figure 19.1). In addition, habitation debris, mostly consisting of ash and bone, with a few ceramic and lithic pieces, has been dumped outside of the south room and has spread, down slope, for several meters. During 1992, the southern room was excavated, and in 1997 a quarter of the western room was excavated and a stratigraphic trench was placed just outside the western wall of the West Room.

STRATIGRAPHY

The site is constructed on a recent loose sand sheet that rests unconformably over the underlying sediment. This lose sand was too thick to allow any footings to be placed on the firmer sediments below (Figure 19.3:1). The slabs of the house walls were placed in a small trench dug to a depth of 35 cm and a width of ca. 15 cm (Figure 19.3:1a). Inside the house Bed 1 is thicker than on the outside because the walls trapped more wind-blown sand during the time of occupation. There is stratigraphic evidence that the site was occupied at least twice, separated by some passage of time. Within the recent sands a layer of fallen scree was observed both along the bedrock outcrop and along the masonry wall. After this loose rock was deposited, additional sand buried them. Artifacts also were recovered from these later sands.

An excavated stratigraphic trench, with a north-south long axis, was dug outside of the possible entryway of the West Room. The recent sand sheet on which the house was built and on which the habitation debris rests, is underlain by a bed of colluvium containing pebbles and gravel (Figure 19.3:2). A layer of very coarse to coarse sand with little silt and fine sand occurs below Bed 2 (Figure 19.3:3). Lying underneath this, is a layer of medium to fine sands (Figure 19.3:4). Further down, one finds a small bed of very coarse to medium coarse sands above a small bed of medium to fine sands (Figure 19.3:5a and 5b), followed by another bed of pebbles and gravel (Figure 19.3:6). This profile shows a repetitive sequence of wet, colluvial deposits followed by increasingly arid aeolian sediments. Beds 2, 3 and 4 of Site E-92-8 correspond, respectively, to Beds 3a, 3b, and 3c of E-97-12 (Applegate, et al. Chapter 15, this volume).
SITE CONSTRUCTION AND OCCUPATIONAL HISTORY

Two techniques were used in the construction of the room walls in this structure. The predominant method for construction of the walls was to bury thin upright Nubian sandstone slabs. These were easily acquired from the top of the nearby rock outcrop that serves as the northern wall of the East and West Rooms of the structure. In addition, thin, and usually small, rocks were placed horizontally on either side of these upright slabs to provide support and stability. This construction technique was used on all walls except one, the wall between the West and South Rooms. This wall used two different techniques in its construction. First, several layers or courses of thick blocks of Nubian sandstone were placed on the ground. Thin Nubian sandstone slabs then were propped against its...