Pottery tempered with sponge from the White Nile, Sudan

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Abstract

Pottery containing abundant organic and siliceous particles of the swamp-dwelling sponge *Eunapius nitens* occurs at occupation sites dated between 3500 and 1500 bp flanking the White Nile in central Sudan. Megascleres, gemmoscleres and gemmules in vast numbers are well preserved in the pottery, megascleres forming the temper. Common features of sponge pottery are: fine paste; wall thickness in the range 4 to 9 mm; internal scoring; deepish, steep-walled bowls with straight or slightly everted rims often decorated with chevron pattern; and a variety of well executed external decoration by incision, rouletting and stamping. Thorough study of the distribution, economy, affinities and chronology of the peoples practising this swamp-based technology is yet to be made. The pottery forms part of a wider tradition in the Nile basin.

Résumé

Dans des sites d’habitat de 3500 à 1500 bp, le long du Nil Blanc, au Soudan central, se trouve une céramique contenant de nombreuses particules organiques et silicieuses de l’éponge *Eunapius nitens*, qui habite les marais. D’énormes quantités de mégasclères, de gemmosclères et de gemmules sont bien préservées dans la céramique—les mégasclères en forment le dégraissant. Parmi les traits communs de la céramique à éponge sont: une pâte fine; des parois épaisses de 4 à 9 mm; des stries internes; des bols profonds à parois raides avec des bords droits ou un peu éversés, souvent décorés de chevrons; et une variété de décors externes bien exécutés par des incisions, des roulettes ou des estampages. On n’a pas encore fait une étude approfondie de la répartition, de l’économie, des affinités et de la chronologie des peuples qui pratiquaient cette technologie des marais. Cette poterie fait partie d’une tradition plus large dans le bassin du Nil.

Distribution of sponge pottery

The White Nile drains the Sudd swamps of southern Sudan. The swamps and seasonally flooded land which now flank the White Nile were formerly more extensive (Adamson, Williams and Gillespie 1982:199). A large number of occupation sites occur in the southern
swamps and along the White Nile on slightly elevated land such as occupation mounds (debbas), levee banks, sand dunes and occasional rocky outcrops (jebels).

In 1973 pottery containing abundant sponge spicules (or scleres) of the megasclere type was found with shell dated at 3030±80 bp (SUA-70) on an island in the White Nile formed by the water of the Jebel Aulia dam (Williams and Adamson 1973:503). Further reconnaissance showed that pottery containing abundant sponge was common at many occupation sites along the lower White Nile. Its known distribution (Fig. 1; Tab. 1) was extended southwards to the edge of the Sudd swamps following examination of some of the surface collections of sherds made in the 1940s by Arkell, Howell and Raven, and now lodged in the National Museum, Khartoum.

Sponge pottery has not been found away from the river and its former floodplains. It is likely to be of wide distribution in the swamps of the Bahr el Jebel, Bahr el Ghazal and the Sobat River, but pottery from these areas has not yet been examined. Pottery containing sponge spicules has been found during excavations at the townsite of Meroe (C. Reed pers. comm.) on the main Nile some 300 km north of the White Nile sites. The large sponge *E. nitens*