EEG: 6 October 2024: Paige Steen, UCL: The Bowl in the Mastaba: Structural Deposits in the Medieval Nile Valley.

Overview of Medieval Nubia

Paige began her talk with an overview of medieval Nubia. The Merotic state had collapsed during the 4th Century CE, and by the mid 6th century CE, 3 kingdoms were established - Nobatia, Makuria and Alodia which maintained close ties with the Coptic church in Egypt.

Outside sources provide evidence that these had adopted Christianity and this soon became visible in the archeological record such as in burials (a mastaba with a relief cross at Old Dongola), and objects (e.g. a lamp bearing cross motifs).

Following Egypt's integration into the caliphate, its population remained mostly Christian despite being ruled by Muslim leaders until at least the 10th century. In Makuria, Christian influence eventually waned between the 14th & 15th centuries CE.

(Left: Terracotta lamp with cross motifs. (BM EA51764)

Ritual and Magic

An image of Apa Shenoute, a church father in Middle Egypt, used ritualistically in a church context (4th-5th century CE), and a higab-type amulet in a purse case have been among the finds. Magic - a primitive forerunner of religion - would have been considered irrational, whereas religion was viewed as more rational at the time.

(Right: Painted image of Apa Shenoute)

Structural Deposits

These were either placed intentionally or accumulated unintentionally. Foundation deposits found in pharaonic temple contexts such as those in Hatshepsut's Temple at Deir el-Bahri included tools used for temple construction. These, as with other early Christian examples, may have had an apotropaic function - sanctifying and protecting the ground by warding off evil spirits. The placing of such structural deposits (a more inclusive term than foundation deposits), are known in both sacred and domestic structures in pharaonic Egypt (the latter including Tell el-Dab'a).

(Image source: Wikipedia)

Nubian Structural Deposits

There are currently 8 Sudanese sites with known medieval structural deposits: Meinarti, Serra East, Farras, Us Island, Mongrat Island, Hambukol, Old Dongola, and Soba. These were placed in

church and domestic contexts and include a diverse range of used materials - pebbles, clay, sand, inscribed vessels etc. As foundations of structures survive more than upper layers, items placed there are more likely to be preserved too. Inverted bowls were found at Serra East. A brick inscribed with holy names was unearthed at Us Island, and inscribed 'magic bowls' were discovered at Hambukol (c.12th century CE). Bowls were also found inverted over other items such as ostraca - to enhance their protective power. The Hambukoi bowls have parallels to 6th century Mesopotamian Judeo-Aramaic 'magic bowls' which were generally placed inverted in people's homes as well as in cemeteries. Bowls, ostraca, and magic bricks sometimes included the names of saints which married protective power.

The Mograt Mastaba Deposit
Mograt is the largest island on the Nile. It is 40km across and is situated between 4th & 5th Cataracts. The cataracts are narrow parts of the Nile which are difficult to negotiate due to protruding rocks. Paige's research focus was at Kurta, on the northern edge of the island. This is where the 'MOG089' Mastaba deposit was found.

At Kurta, a large platform (13-15m) was found on a fortress wall where a church had subsequently been built. The 'MOG089' Mastaba structural deposit was discovered in situ in the church, consisting of a glazed bowl found inverted along with 2 iron crosses.

One of the two iron crosses which were also found, was plain but the other had a faience centrepiece. Both were lacking a means of suspension or a pole for liturgical benediction use. Whereas Egypt had a traditional use of copper alloys for crosses, Nubia had an iron working tradition, which may explain the prevalence of iron crosses. These items would have been seen as prestige objects.
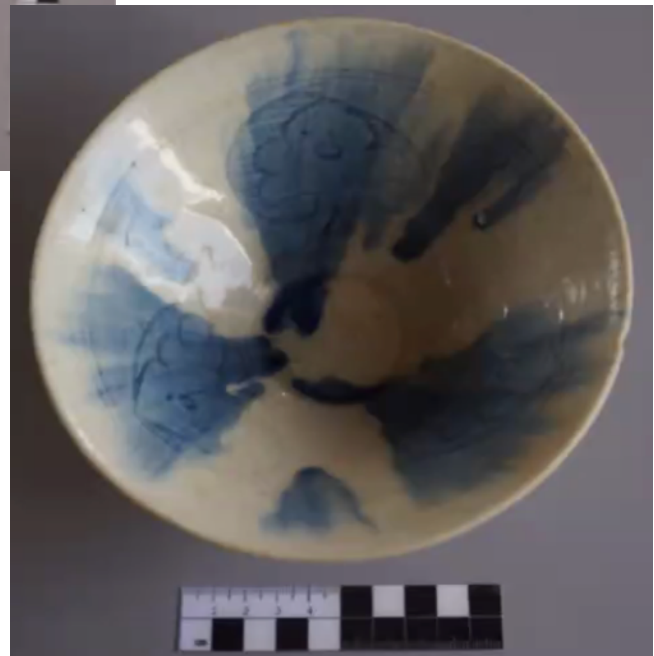
The bowl was glazed with incised decoration and cobalt splashes. Glazing did not exist in medieval Nubia, so the bowl would have been imported, maybe from Fustat (the early name for Cairo), where potters may have had links with Syria. This type of ware was being produced from late 11th - 12th Century, whereas the original construction date of the church where it was found is dated 7th-8th century CE, so these deposits suggest a later reconstruction phase. The bowl was was placed inverted possibly in parallel to the Mesopotamian 'demon traps' and would have been viewed as a high value prestigious object, suggesting wealthy patronage.

(Image copyright: Paige Steen)

The situation in Egypt
The remains of medieval towns are under modern towns, so are difficult to access archaeologically. The historic prioritising of the pharaonic period for excavation has led to the careless removal and discard of medieval remains. Sebakh quarrying for fertiliser has also destroyed late antique & medieval remains. In the north, the groundwater level in the Delta region poses an additional difficulty for archaeology. But at Aswan, whenever a current building is demolished, a keyhole trench is dug. This has revealed some important medieval structures, though with attendant health & safety concerns!

Concluding Thoughts
•Structural deposits were a widespread but flexible practice in medieval Nubia.
•The Mograt mastaba deposit can be considered a rich outlier.
•The connection between Mesopotamian and Nubian 'magic bowls'

- leaves questions for further research.
- Structural deposits - standard construction procedure?
- Challenges in Egyptian medieval archaeology.

Questions
Q: Who would have been the congregation in those medieval churches? Local farmers?
A: A contemporary cemetery was found near the fortress (only a couple of graves have been excavated), so possibly a more monastic body?
More examples need to be found to confirm current findings.

Mick Tweddle   23/10/24 (revised)