

The Socio-Economical Character of the A-Group in Lower Nubia (c. 3700-2800 BCE)

Carolina Quintana

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Abstract: This paper aims to define the socio-economic order of the A-Group in Lower Nubia. The nature of this group has been discussed by several researchers using regional archeological data, but no agreement has been reached. Different interpretations are partly the product of diverse definitions of sedentism and nomadism, and of models commonly used to explain the socio-economical character of A-Group communities. These concepts are often loosely applied without clear definition and evidence supporting the models is often lacking. For this reason, the paper begins by defining concepts such as nomadic pastoralism and sedentism, which are central to this investigation. The approach of different ethno-archaeological papers is also a fundamental methodological tool for the paper. After considering theoretical and methodological tools and the study of archaeological material belonging to the A-Group, the paper postulates that this group could have organized itself as a semi-sedentary community, which exploited diverse ecological niches in Lower Nubia.

Introduction

For a long time scholarship has described the relationship between Egypt and Nubia as asymmetrical where Egypt played a role of dominance. This point of view conceived the Nubians¹ as a population incapable of developing a culture of its own, identifying the archeological evidence as the result of the Egyptian influence or as product of the Egyptian interests in the region (Reisner 1910: 313-332; Firth 1912). However, other opinions have arisen since the mid-twentieth century; the increasing numbers of excavations in the region as well as new approaches from the so-called 'New Archaeology' have shown the existence of different native cultural developments (Abkan, A-Group, C-Group, X-Group) in Lower Nubia along of the Nile Valley (Seele 1974; Adams 1977; Save-Soderbergh 1979; Nordstrom 1972). A native culture, the A-Group,² inhabited the region from approximately 3700 to 2800 BCE (Säve-Söderbergh 1979; Seele 1974: 29-43; Nordstrom 1972).³ As soon as scholars became aware of this group, they tried to define its socio-economical order based upon the information provided by archaeological excavations undertaken in the area.

In addition to the different interpretations that have addressed the problem of the A-Group's socio-economic culture, a new perspective has developed since 2000 as a result of the recent excavations conducted in areas remote from the Nile River, such as Wadi Shaw, Sahal and Laqiya (all placed in Laqiya's region, located in the Eastern Sahara). These recent analyses include material from the most distant already mentioned excavations and show a pastoral socio-economic order within the A-Group; earlier views were based on the material recovered from sites located near the Nile and had not resulted in a consensus on this point. In this paper, I propose that the different hypotheses about the archaeological evidence from A-Group sites are related to the existence of diverse ecological niches in Lower Nubia.

Among the earliest analyses, Bruce Trigger supported the idea that the A-Group settled mainly along the river, developing agricultural activities and only leaving the area during floods. Moreover, he stated that 'despite the appearance of unsettled, virtually nomadic, conditions in this and later living sites, there is other evidence suggesting considerably more stability. In particular, there are secondary burials in a large number of graves which appear to have been made some time after the original burial' (Trigger 1965: 69; 1980).

Adopting a different perspective, Hans Åke Nordström considered that the A-Group's economic activities to have been based on small scale agriculture along the banks of the Nile, hunting (mainly fauna from the savannah), fishing and the gathering of plants, fruits and mollusks. Finally, he stated that even though there is no evidence of cattle raising, the development of pastoralist activity should not be dismissed. His opinion is based on the discovery of bones and leather from domestic animals in tombs as well as residential sites and on the existence of pottery '... which is characterized by an abundant temper of finely divided straw or grass (...) is made up of a paste of clay Nile mud mixed with cattle dung' (Nordström, H. A. 1972: 23-24.). In turn, William Adams and Peter Shinnie (Adams 1977: 118-132 and Shinnie 1996: 47) suggested that agriculture was introduced systematically from 4000 BC onwards. However, this activity would not provide a complete subsistence base, and both fishing and hunting were still relevant for these groups. In addition, Andrea Manzo (1999: 42) suggested that the A-Group had an economy mainly based on barley and leguminous plants crops, but activities like hunting, fishing and gathering were common.

David O'Connor and Jacques Reinold (O'Connor 1993: 12-18 and Reinold 2000: 85-87) considered the A-Group to be an agricultural population. O'Connor, however, suggested that there would have been sedentary farm-

ers, while Reinold thought that the presence of houses built with perishable materials or even the usage of stone shelters could symbolize a pattern of settlement with semi-nomadic characteristics. In another interpretation, Sabrina Rampersad (Rampersad 1999, 160-172) theorized that hunting and gathering were the most important activities and both pastoralism and small-scale agriculture were only additional activities.

Recently new excavations in the region of Laqiya by Mathias Lange have influenced authors such as Lasló Török and Nils Anfinset (Lange 2003, 2006, 2007; Török 2009; Anfinset 2010). They have suggested the existence of pastoralists in Lower Nubia. Laqiya is a region that could have sustained water wells for local communities and their pastures for feeding domestic animals. Lange discovered a large quantity of native pottery within many A-Group sites (Lange 2003). He stated that 'Laqiya was part of a settlement area for this cultural group, which the main center was the Northeast of Nile's Valley in Lower Nubia' (Lange 2006: 110). This evidence and the discovery of sites with lumped bones, led Lange to suggest that these settlements could be related to the Nubian pastoralists who used the pastures outside the Nile valley as part of their seasonal transhumance movements (Lange 2006, 2007).

These discoveries persuaded Nils Anfinset to see the A-Group as having a socio-economic order related to the pastoralism, and he noted the existence of small scale agricultural activity based on the growing of barley, wheat and legumes. In addition, he proposed that the A-Group were participants in a complex system of exchanges, in which the inhabitants of Lower Nubia were intermediaries between the inhabitants of southern regions and those located in Upper Egypt (Anfinset 2010). A similar point of view is presented by David Wengrow, who suggested that the A-Group depended on the networks of exchanges and had an economy based on cattle raising due to the limits that the environmental conditions placed on agricultural development (Wengrow 2007).

Finally, both László Török and María Carmela Gatto suggested the importance of pastoralism in the A-Group (Török 2009 and Gatto 2001, 2004). As mentioned above, Gatto emphasized the existence of two groups: one, located in the surroundings of Wadi Allaqi and Wadi Korosko, and whose main strategy of subsistence was the exchange with Upper Nilotic groups; the other, located in the Second Cataract area, developed agriculture and grazing activities. Given the presence of livestock dung in pottery and leather remains found in the graves, grazing would have been likely. She added to this information the discovery of two pottery caches in Bir-Sahara, which would indicate for certain the presence of the A-Group in the Egyptian Western Desert (Gatto 2001-2002, 2004).

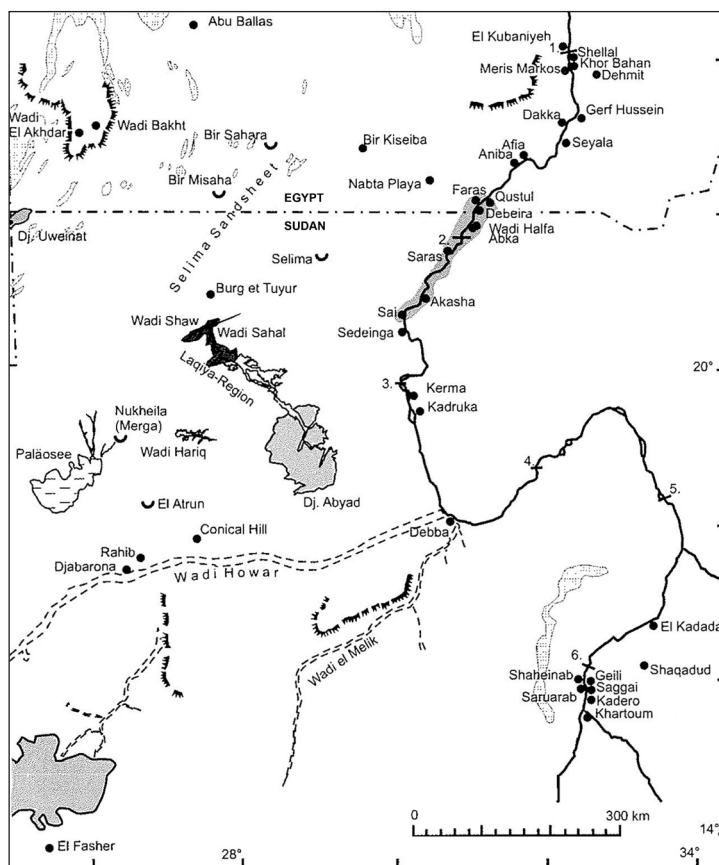


Figure 1: Map of Nubia (after Lange 2002: 108)

Geographical Settings

The region occupied by the A-Group integrates the Nile Valley and its immediate hinterland (the Eastern and Western Desert). The Valley is a floodplain of black loamy soil that extends from Nubia to the Delta. The riverside, formed of mud and sand, rises 1.5 - 3 meters above the surrounding plain. The floods occasionally and briefly submerged these river plains because they generally poured into surrounding streams. The floods increased during Mid-Summer (mainly because of Ethiopia's rainy season) and they covered the plains for a period of between six to ten weeks and sometimes more, until the river level subsided. After the flood, the soil was completely sodden and, being loamy, the humidity was retained for months. Once the plains' soils dried out, the damp mud was suitable for cultivation (Butzer 1995).

Between 4000-3000 BCE, the Nile's floods increased due to the quick accumulation of the sediments in the lower courses of the desert's streams. However, from 3000 BC, the plains that were prone to flooding by the Nile were 6 meters lower (Butzer 1995). Furthermore, the Nile Valley is between two of the world's driest deserts. In the fourth millennium BCE, the climate of the eastern Sahara became drier and the lakes in Wadi Shaw became seasonal (Lange 2006: 110-111). Nevertheless, in the deserts there is the potential for an occasional concentration of water in wadis, local depressions, or in shallow aquifers, and this is critical for the regional distribution of vegetation.

These water resources surrounding the Nile Valley could have been used by human groups (Redford 2001: 385).

Theoretical concepts

To begin with it is crucial to define the concepts of *sedentism* and *nomadic pastoralism*. These models are commonly used to explain the socio-economical order of the A-Group, but they are often used without being totally clear what they refer to. I define *sedentism* as a system formed from different components that can be, or not, simultaneously present in a community '...there also are different functionally and spatially segmented components of sedentism, ranging from *burial sedentism*, and *ceremonial sedentism* to domestic or *occupational sedentism*. That is, many sites may reflect sedentism in their burial and ceremonial patterning but not necessarily in their occupational patterning and vice versa' (Dillehay, in press). Therefore, I consider a society to be *completely sedentary* when the archaeological remains provide evidence of these three key elements: *burial sedentism*, *ceremonial sedentism*, or domestic or *occupational sedentism* (Dillehay, in press). All these components should be coordinated and codependent not only on a spatial level, but also on a functional one. If only one element is found, I consider this population *semi-sedentary*: some groups have probably been sedentary in terms of living in a place all year round, but they never developed ceremonialism on a public or monumental scale.

Second, *nomadic pastoralism* is a double concept, constituted by two notions that can be totally independent one of the other: on the one hand, *nomadism*, which implies a cyclic movement in the territory; on the other, *pastoralism*, a subsistence way based in the herding and raising of animals, in this case cattle. I have chosen a combined definition for these concepts as some researchers have recently suggested (Cribb 1991: 17; Lange 2003: 122; Anfinset 2010: 67). Thus, *nomadic pastoralism* should be defined as 'a distinctive form of food production economy in which the extensive mobile pastoralism is the predominant activity, and where the most part of the population is implied in periodic pastoral migrations' (Khazanov 1984:17). These migrations are usually related to diverse strategies applied by pastoralists in relation to economical as well as ecological particularities: they can be connected to cognitive rules that derive from their activities in relation to the residential sites; the possible development of an agricultural activity; the landscape conditions and religious and ritual aspects (Flores Ochoa 1977: 212; Merlino and Rabey 1983: 162; Chang 1992: 65-67).

Aside from all these aspects, it is worth mentioning the necessary and indissoluble connection the pastoral communities have with the outside world. In this sense, the economy was not autarkic. Exchange networks and the dissemination of information played a fundamental role not only on food, but also, in some communities, on prestige goods (Lewis 1965: 328-331; Stenning 1965: 364-370; Ikeya and Fratkin 2005: 1-14; Khazanov 1984:

161; Nielsen 1997/ 1998: 140-145; Lancaster and Lancaster 1998: 25-27).

In turn, I consider the information obtained from the studies on current Nilotic societies and how it may contribute to allow a rechecking of the A-Group's archeological register, which could give a more precise approximation of their socio-economical character. Furthermore, with ethno-archaeological studies, I will discuss the evidence and criteria for the different components of these definitions above, because this is the only way to test them.

Ethno-archeological considerations about pastoralists

Although ethno-archeological approaches to Nilotic pastoralist communities in Nubia are fairly limited, anthropologists have focussed their research on these populations more broadly.⁴ Some ethno-archeological studies of pastoralists and agricultural communities located in surrounding areas, mainly in Ethiopia and the East of Africa, have been done (Chang and Koster 1986; David 1971; Gonzalez Ruibal 2006; Fernandez Martínez 2004). These approaches, along with comparable work on Greek and Anatolian populations, allow an analysis of the A-Group's material culture from a comparative perspective, and the identification of the nature of material culture and site typology that are common in pastoralist communities.

In relation to material culture, Roger Cribb established three main criteria to divide the corpus of material: firstly, the mobility of the objects or the possibility of being carried from one place to another; secondly, the difference between perishable and durable equipment; and finally, valuable or unnecessary objects, determined in connection with the object's value (measured in the difficulty or cost to acquire it) (Cribb 1991: 68-69; Appadurai 1991: 17-88). In fact, most of the material possessed by pastoralist communities is portable: tents, axes and shovels. Pottery generally has handles to be carried easily, but it is highly fragile and can be broken easily, whereas metal objects are durable and mostly valued. These objects are usually repaired when they have some kind of imperfection (Cribb 1991: 76; Anfinset 2010).

Claudia Chang and Harold Kosler (1986) identified seven different kinds of sites related to pastoralist communities: residential; grazing; watering wells; movement trails; sheltering and confinement of animals (stables and corrals); storage; and places related to ritual behavior. The discovery of sites with enclosures for domestic animals are considered by these authors as a key sign to characterize a group as pastoralist: '(...) all pastoralists confine their animals at times, regardless of their degree of mobility, and such activity leads to a significant change in the immediate environment of the enclosure through soil compaction and deposition of dung and urine with concomitant changes in soil and vegetation characteristics. This type of site should be particularly attractive to archaeologists. Often through satellite or

aerial reconnaissance such sites can be recognized by differential soil albedo or by vegetation (...)’(Chang and Kosler 1986: 115). Nicholas David, as a result of his ethno-archaeological work with the *fulanis*,⁵ analyzed the posts related to animal enclosures and found a pattern (David 1971: 120), whereas Roger Cribb also suggested that animal enclosures are easy to find in nomadic camps and claimed that the most obvious evidence of a pastoralist activity is the finding of bones and animal excrement deposits (Cribb 1991: 69).

The presence of grazing sites is important because they diversify available resources. The modifications introduced on occasions by pastoralist groups suggest that pasture actually existed in different areas. For example, in many Mediterranean regions, stones are used to build corrals. In addition, pastoralists generally dig watering wells and simultaneously build channels to have easier access to the resource. Another remarkable feature is the existence of caves or shelters, which are often storage places for surplus fodder used to feed cattle during periods of shortage (Chang and Kosler 1986: 112-113).

With respect to religious beliefs, the most important ritual sites in nomad pastoralist societies are burials, which can provide data related to gender differentiation, social stratification and exchange networks, among other aspects. In relation to residential sites, David supported the idea that the domestic buildings present different spheres of analyses, one linked to human matters - such as age, gender, kinship bonds, affinity with the inhabitants- and the other to wealth, power and social differentiation (David 1971: 117). These particularities would explain the different size of the structures, the usage of different materials or the finding of diverse material culture. Chang and Kosler (1986: 112) consider pastoralist residential sites to be commonly defined by households built with perishable material, or portable shelters.

Finally, it is relevant to mention that not only ethno-archaeological approaches but also anthropological studies have stressed the importance of the small scale horticulture and farming undertaken by pastoralists (Robertshaw and Collet 1983; David 1971: 121-125; Evans Pritchard 1956; Liendhart 1985). Generally, in the temporal pastoralist sites there is no evidence of agricultural products because the seeds of cultigens only survive after a hazardous carbonizing process, so hazard plays an important role in their preservation (Robertshaw and Collet 1983: 73).

The remains of pastoralist communities are difficult to detect in the archeological register of the Nile Valley, so it becomes crucial to consider ethno-archaeological information to establish their presence. In this way, it is important to define the socio-economical order of the A-Group through a revised reading of the archeological remains combined with the information provided by ethno-archaeological analysis.

Archaeological remains of the A-Group

In this section I introduce a selection and description of sites and archeological remains of the A-Group. It is acknowledged that I have only chosen material that can show socio-economical activities.

The settlement areas of the A-Group were temporarily located near the Nile; however, as mentioned above, some A-Group residential sites were found far from the banks of the Nile, mainly in Laqiya and in the Egyptian Western Desert, at Bir-Sahara (Lange 2006, 2007).

Along the Nile Valley, archaeological teams have registered pottery artifacts, lithic material (mortars and ground stone artifacts), macro-botanical barley remains, leguminous plants and wheat, and some hunting and fishing remains. But it is important to mention that in a few other defined contexts, domestic animals were also found. Moreover, in some residential areas of the Nile Valley, evidence of bonfires (i.e. sites 316 and 340) were found and, in others nearby, individual burials of domestic animals were registered (one burial or tomb in each site) (i.e. sites 371 and 303) (Nördström 1972: 19; Sadr 1991: 84-90; Anfinset 2010: 108).

The residential structures were probably constructed with perishable material, given that a lot of post fragments were recovered in sites (i.e. sites 370 and 316). However, between 3150 to 2800 BCE, domestic construction changed: the structures began to be built with sandstone and boulders probably from the Dakka, Afya, El Riqa, Argin West and Abu Simbel regions (Nordstrom 1972: 134, 140, 155, 225; Török 2009: 40-41).

In Laqiya, the evidence is different. Mathis Lange registered abundant A-Group pottery in diverse sites at Wadi Sahal and Wadi Shaw and he identified a type of pottery ‘Laqiya type’ which did not occur in the Nile valley. To this material culture should be added the discovery of one fire place and a concentration of sherds and bones in Wadi Sahal 82/38-1 and a skull of a domestic cow in Wadi Sahal 82/38-2 (dated around 3000 BCE), but it was not possible to associate it with any other archeological material (Lange 2003: 108). In Wadi Shaw 83/120 two fireplaces, three pits, and some pottery objects were found. From the vicinity of this site, also, a copper awl and palette were registered. In 82/33 site, 36 stone-circles could be connected with housing elements, such as hunts or tents (Lange 2003, 2006). In the site 82/82-2, bones, stones artifacts, pottery sherds, and two fireplaces with remains of charcoal were recovered. Finally, some sheep or goat bones were identified with A- Group pottery in the site Wadi Shaw 82/ 38-3 (Lange 2006).

As mentioned above, two pottery caches from the A-Group were identified in domestic contexts at Bir-Sahara, together with utilitarian pottery related to the Nagada culture. It is worth mentioning that this area was only a water source in the desert, and because of this Gatto associated the discovery with the temporary presence of A-Group individuals who used this location to carry out

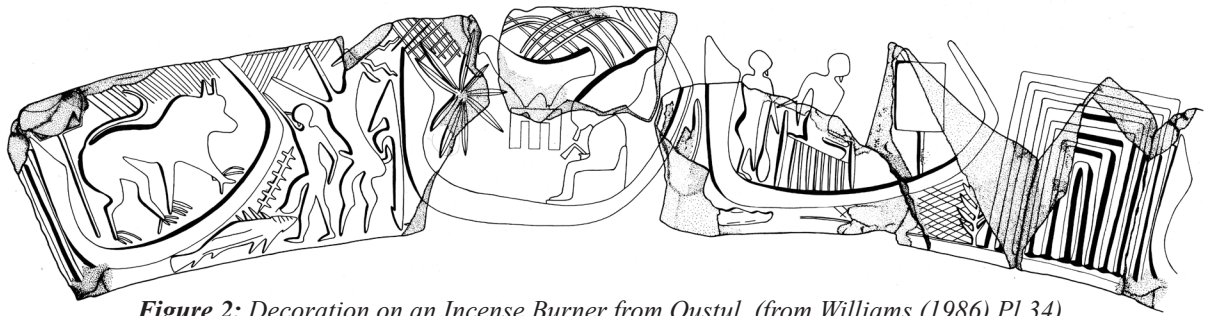


Figure 2: *Decoration on an Incense Burner from Qustul (from Williams (1986) Pl 34)*

exchanges. She suggested that the inhabitants of Lower Nubia used not only pottery of their own but also pottery from other societies (Gatto 2001-2002: 57-60).

Nevertheless, as I have already argued, most of the evidence belongs to burials located along the Nile Valley (in Laqiya and Bir-Sahara no burials were identified). Several funerary sites were used for a long period, for example, cemetery 137 in Sayala and cemetery L in Qustul (Firth 1912: 201; Williams 1986). It is worth mentioning that these burials were exceptional when compared with other A-Group cemeteries because of the presence of goods such as gold-handled maces, copper items, delicate pottery and exotic objects demonstrating the existence of social stratification inside these communities.

Seals and impressions of seals, personal ornaments, stone and clay figurines, organic and mineral materials, objects made of stone, bones, ivory and metal are frequently recovered from tombs of different Nubian A-Group cemeteries (Säve-Söderbergh 1979; Rampersad 1999). More precisely, the cemetery L of Qustul shows the importance of cattle.⁶ Independent livestock burials were found there;

probably they functioned as a social differentiator among the inhabitants. But only in this site of Lower Nubia does the burial of cattle indicate a high social status. In fact, some other animal remains have also been found there, but their social significance has not yet been established (Flores 1999: 102, 28-31, 74-75; Williams 1986: 14-18).⁷ Moreover, in cemetery L a limestone incense burner depicting a Nilotic background scene was found (Figure 2). The scene shows three boats on the river; the third boat was occupied by a large quadruped with a pointed muzzle, which might be a bull (Seele 1974: 38).

The bull symbolized the divine power and virile fertility of a chief in Lower Nubia and ancient Egypt.⁸ In Egypt, the Predynastic local rulers and later the kings were associated with this animal (Conrad 1959: 72; Gordon and Schwabe 1988, Wengrow 2001). The iconographic material from the Early Dynastic Period supports this interpretation. For example, on the reverse of the Narmer Palette,⁹ a bull representing the king is depicted entering into what seems to be a fortified place and defeating its enemies (Figure 3). Several specialists, Gordon and



Figure 3: *A photograph of the Narmer Palette. Photo: Wikimedia Commons*

Schwabe (1988: 1995), have considered the possibility that the Egyptian royal scepter represents a bull phallus. The discovery of the standardized form of bull's head amulets, some dated as early as Naqada I, the relief-carved bovine heads such as that appearing on the 'Hathor' palette attributed to the late Naqada II period, and the multimedia bull's heads sculpted in rows on 'benches' associated with several First Dynasty mastabas at Saqqara demonstrate the scope of symbolic importance for cattle beyond that of late predynastic and early dynastic 'royal' iconography (Flores 1999: 93). However, as I mentioned before, cattle do not seem to play the role of a differentiator of social status in A-Group communities, with the exception of the L cemetery of Qustul.

In addition to these symbolic aspects, the communities that integrate with the so-called A-Group were not isolated. On the contrary, they participated in a network of exchanges that connected Upper Egypt, the Eastern and Western Deserts, Upper Nubia and Subsaharan Africa. Products such as feathers of exotic birds, ivory, animal leathers and ostrich eggs from the core of Africa were found in funerary contexts both in Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia (Shinnie 1996: 47-52; Manzo 1999).

The products exchanged between the A-Group and the communities located in Upper Egypt were diverse and abundant. On the one hand, the inhabitants of Upper Egypt provided different kinds of food and drinks, such as beer, wine, cheese and oils that were stored in low-quality pottery vessels; linen pieces of cloth, fine pottery and, finally, goods made with materials from other areas such as copper and pottery from Palestine, shellfish from the Red Sea, Mesopotamian cylinder seals and lapis-lazuli from the Iranian plateau (Manzo 1999; Mark 1997). In cemetery L of Qustul, a group of jugs resembling Early Bronze pottery and a cylindrical vessel with a rectangular opening in one side and three big snakes around the container body probably originated in Mesopotamia or western Asia were found (Seele 1974: 30; Williams 1986: 67-107). In turn, Nubian inhabitants probably supplied the Northern societies with products from the Middle East of Africa like ivory, incense, ebony and leather (O'Connor 1993). These goods were probably carried over land and not by boats, because the sinuous course of the Nile and the cataracts were obstacles for an easy fluvial navigation (Redford 2001: 552).

Not many pottery pieces from the A-Group have been found in Upper Egypt, but it is worth mentioning that near the Fort cemetery at Hierakonpolis in one grave (number 8) an A-Group bowl was discovered (Adams 1996). It dated from the Terminal Period and was associated with Upper Egyptian objects from Nagada III. Moreover, two pieces of ostrich eggshell with typical Nubian A-Group decoration, were discovered in grave 2 of Locality 6 at Hierakonpolis (Adams 1996: 3). Gatto pointed out that a few sherds of pottery were identified in the Enclosure of Khasekhemwy and that 'Nubian pottery has also been reported from the Main Deposit in the floodplain town of

Nekhen and at the predynastic temple (HK29A)' (Gatto 2009:1). Finally, another pottery piece found came from the Mesopotamian community of Habuka Kabira (3300 BCE) in the Levant. It is possible that it was found so far away because of the exchange networks established among Upper Egypt, the Levant and Mesopotamia.

An analysis of A-Group archeological material according to the ethno-archeological information

In this section, I shall attempt to define the A-Group socio-economic character, taking into account the possible existence of pastoralism in the region and connecting the ethno-archeological information about pastoralist communities with our conceptual definitions and the cultural material of the society in focus.

No traces of corrals have been detected in the excavations carried by different researchers in Lower Nubia during twentieth century (Firth 1912, Seele 1974). Corrals, as I have said, are an indication used by ethno-archeologists to define a society as pastoralist. Moreover, neither bones nor deposits of animal excrement have been found. This evidence is also considered crucial in defining these kinds of communities.¹⁰

The sites' typology, as emphasized by Chang and Kosler (1986: 112-113), a lot of ritual places (burials) were found at sites that have no specific pastoralist activity. However, we should not reject the presence of cattle as an indicator of social status in the Qustul L cemetery. The discovery of Nubian cultural material could show the existence of pasture areas, but there are no signs of watering wells or construction channels.

A-Group housing sites were built with perishable materials. In fact at a large number of them post fragments have been identified. However, from 3150-2800 BCE other structures were found mainly built with sandstone and boulders. This would imply certain social differentiation (relating this aspect to the prestige goods found in some tombs). Nicholas David (1971) considered that the pastoralists' housing structures were completely related to social matters connected to wealth, power and social differentiation. The lack of structures built of perishable materials would demonstrate more permanence and the capacity to stay for long periods in one place. These sites may represent the existence of ceremonial centers, the presence of elite residences or of central places of exchange.

When considering the discovery of residential sites in three different areas (the Nile Valley, Laqiya and Bir-Sahara), I could conjecture that the A-Group took advantage of different ecological resources. However, we consider that given the quantity of sites found along the Nile, the inhabitants of Lower Nubia settled in their shores, eventually staying in Laqiya and Bir-Sahara. In other words, I suggest that the A-Group was organized with a semi-nomadic order based on settlements along

the shores of the Nile by Lower Nubia. They exploited the diverse ecological riches to satisfy their needs for subsistence. These data reveal the order's complexity, which implies different kinds of exploitation, fishing, hunting, agriculture, exchange and grazing.

A few remarks about pottery are necessary. Generally in pastoralist communities, pottery is rough and has handles, but the A-Group pottery is carefully worked in form and decoration, which indicates several things: that pottery production was a relevant activity in A-Group (not only for funerary purposes but also for domestic ones); secondly, that a standardized production existed; thirdly, that the vessels' sizes would indicate that they were used for storage; and finally, given that the pottery usually did not have handles and there is no evidence to suggest the use of rope slings, this would imply that it was not made to be carried. Regarding the copper objects (awls, chisels, axes, adzes, knife blades), they were considered prestige goods mainly because of their shortage or the context in which they were found. Most of them were recovered from funerary sites, but some of them were also found in residential sites (Anfinset 2010: 155-160).

The fauna remains discovered reveals that hunting and fishing were crucial to feed the inhabitants of Lower Nubia, whereas the absence of domestic animal fossils would suggest the absence of food production based on cattle raising. The development of agricultural activity along the Nile Valley is undeniable, mainly because the settlements were located on the fertile riverbanks and because of the discovery of a macro botanical register in some places.

The importance of the A-Group's network with 'the outside world' has been shown through the abundant quantity of Upper Egyptian objects found in different places, such as some Mesopotamian and Levantine pieces that were found in the L cemetery. I should also take into account Gatto's hypothesis, which says that Bir-Sahara is an A-Group exchange center. As we have seen, the role that exchange played was very important, however these networks deserve a more detailed analysis which exceeds this work.

To sum up, there is no conclusive evidence to define the socio-economical order of the A-Group as nomadic-pastoralist. In fact, the absence of yards, domestic animals, food production, corrals, rough pottery with handles and watering wells, among other aspects, makes its classification difficult. The A-Group probably had a semi-sedentary order because, according to our definition, we found 'burial sedentism', which was reflected in some funerary sites reused by generations and also the exploitation of ecological niches to develop diverse activities such as fishing, hunting, harvest, exchanging, farming with a possible and incipient cattle/livestock grazing because of the evidence found in the region of Laqiya of Bir-Sahara. The fact that most of the residential and funerary sites were found along the Nile could be a sign that most of

the population took advantage of the shore's resources and the fertile land to develop their agricultural activities, whereas little groups migrated during certain periods to graze in Laqiya, and to exchange in Bir-Sahara.

Conclusion

The inhabitants of Lower Nubia exploited several different ecological niches. They moved along the Nile not only to develop agricultural activities but also to exploit riverine resources and to undertake exchange activities facilitated by the river. The evidence, also, points to the develop of different activities in areas far away from the Nile river such as a incipient grazing in the Laqiya aregion and exchange networks at Bir-Sahara. So, I argue that the communities that integrated A-Group activities had a semi-sedentary order: on one hand, they reused sites over generations (funerary sites) while on the other hand, they exploited different ecological niches to develop diverse activities. Thus, the Nubian A-Group was fully aware of their environment and they took advantage of all the resources available to them.

Carolina Quintana
Universidad Nacional de Buenos Aires,
Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y
Técnicas (CONICET),
Argentina.
quintana_caro@yahoo.com.ar

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Endnotes

- 1 The ‘Nubians’ –and predynastic periods, the Egyptians – did not constitute an unified socio-political entity, but they were configured in small communal organizations, so references to the Nubians (and to the Egyptians before the emergence of the State) are an ethno-cultural definition rather than a political one. Moreover, the inhabitants of the First Cataract were called Nagadans because the discovery of Egyptian objects and pottery could be linked to a group who had similar practices to the Nagadans. So, Maria Carmela Gatto believed that they could be Nagadans (Gatto 2004).
- 2 These names were proposed by G. Reisner (1910), who established the names A, B, C and X-Groups to designate the new cultures he discovered at the beginning of the Twentieth century. Later on, it was recognized that the B-Group did not exist (Smith 1991). Despite the fact most Nubiologists followed Reisner’s nomenclature, William Adams (1977) introduced the term ‘horizon’ to avoid the social connotation that the use of the concept ‘group’ implies.
- 3 Due to differences in the material culture discovered at different sites, some researchers (i.e. Carmela Gatto) preferred to use the concept of ‘A-Groups’ rather than A-Group to define the people who lived in Lower Nubia during the fourth millennium. Maria Carmela Gatto (2004) re-examined the evidence, especially the funerary record, and noticed differences in the typology of tomb shafts, pottery and evidence associated with the burials such as grave goods. So, she considered the ‘A-Group’ culture to be not homogeneous, mainly because in Lower Nubia there were at least two groups with the same cultural background but with different characteristics in the cultural material. One of these groups was localized in the Wadi Allaqi and its hinterland, and the other in the Second Cataract Region. Pottery and palettes related to predynastic Egypt were discovered in the first region, which probably indicates that trading was the most important subsistence activity. Regarding the Cataract Region, Maria Carmela Gatto suggested that the cattle skins found in the graves and dung found in some kinds of pottery could be linked to an agro-pastoral subsistence pattern. Nevertheless, I prefer to use the traditional term ‘A-Group’ because I consider that a definitive adoption of the plural needs a more extensive analysis that exceeds the aims of this article.
- 4 Shahack-Gross, Marshall, Ryan, Weiner 2004 consider the Maasai pastoralists as a Nilotic group. Some anthropological works are: Evans-Pritchard 1956, 1962; Liendhart 1985; Hutchison 1992.
- 5 The fulani was integrated by some groups that developed different activities considering the natural problems and social pressure. Because of that, some of them had a nomadic and pastoralist life style, and others were sedentary farmers (Stenning 1960).
- 6 The site is too small, it had 33 tombs which some of them were important because of their big size and also because they had abundant prestige goods. To have a deeper point of view of this site and its objects see Seele (1974: 29-43) and Williams (1986).
- 7 Both in ancient societies and the current ones, cattle is a sign of social status. However, one important difference between both of them is: possibly in Egypt and in Nubia for sure, cattle was remarked for emphasizing the social importance of people after their death; in the current societies, oxes, cows and bulls are indicators of social differentiation in life. Nowadays, men’s richness such as their social position depends of the quantity of cattle. This situation happens because cattle mediates in every social and individual aspects; first, between men relationship, divine and ancestors; secondly, in the humans’ conflicts; thirdly, in the connections established between the lineage groups; finally in the individual’s growth and development (Burton 1978, 1979; Liendhart 1985: 18-34, 249-289).
- 8 Currently, in the pastoralist communities located in Nile’s Valley, the bull also symbolizes the chief’s divine powers. This animal is considered a dominant male that exerts the power over women and inhabitants that integrate the group. According to the Dinka, this animal is connected with the family’s father and the older man of the camp, so it reflects two functions: procreation and organization (father and chief). Moreover, regarding to the battle and conflict, the Dinkas identify bulls as good warriors and because of this, men try to be compared with them. Similar conceptions have the Nuer communities (Liendhart 1985: 82; Beidelman 1966: 460).
- 9 This object makes reference to King Narmer who is considered the first king of the First Dynasty, which dated around 3150 B.C. (Redford 2001: 494-495). It should be notes that this date is not accepted by all researchers.
- 10 In Upper Egypt, during Nagada I and II, the existence of pastoralist activity was taking in account because of the discovery of a premises’ system similar to a corral delimited by trenches and orifices (to put posts). Moreover, bones and excrement deposits were found in HK29 in Upper Egypt (Friedman 1996: 24; Wengrow 2007: 103-104).