



Volume 82 Number 316 June 2008

## Es-Sour: a Neolithic site near Meroe, Sudan

[Azhari Mustafa Sadig](#)

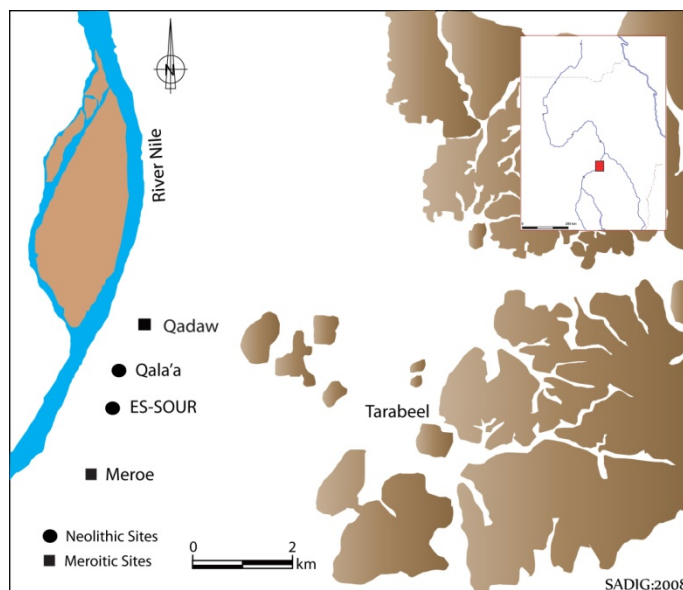
### The site

The site of es-Sour (16° 57.045' N / 33° 43.133' E) is located c. 35km from Shendi, 1.5km from the right bank of the modern Nile channel (Figures 1 and 2). It occupies an area of c. 176 x 90m, and while generally flat, forms two low mounds on its eastern side. The site has been the subject of excavations by the Department of Archaeology of the University of Khartoum since 2004 (Sadig 2005).

During three seasons from 2005-2007, we excavated 15 test-pits across the site. The results of these excavations were extremely positive, demonstrating the existence of Neolithic occupation deposits up to 80cm deep in some places, although affected by water and wind erosion, and by some later graves (Meroitic and medieval) cut into the site. Material from the site is similar to that recovered from al-Kadada, which lies about 30km upriver, but no associated cemetery has yet been identified at Es-Sour. However, as at Kadada, two burials of infants, contained in large pots, were found within the settlement site.

### Archaeological materials

The settlement debris included large quantities of shells, domestic and wild animal bones, lithics, sandstone and granite grinders fragments, pottery sherds, as well as a small number of bone and ivory tools, and some human figurines



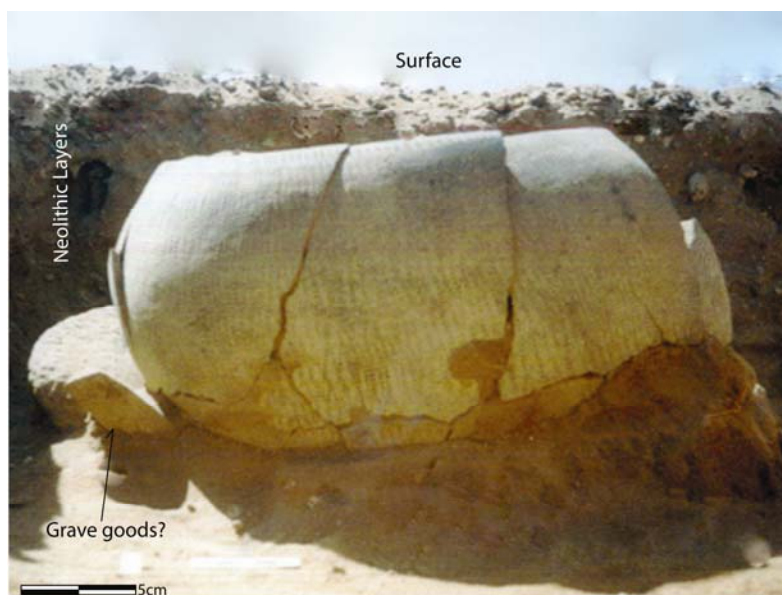
**Figure 1.** Location of es-Sour in Sudan.

### Burials in pottery vessels

One important discovery at the site was the presence of pot-burials (Figure 3). In the Middle Nile, the practice of pot-burials was first discovered at el-Kadada and seems to have been restricted to young children *'only to children up to six years old'* (Geus 1984: 28). Two pot-burials were discovered at es-Sour. The two pots containing the burials are large and decorated with the rocker stamp technique. The offerings associated with the burials include lower and upper grindstones found just beside one pot (Figure 3), while fragments of ostrich eggs, shells, and one bead may indicate the types of offerings placed inside the pot.



**Figure 2.** Aerial view of es-Sour in relation to the Nile and the royal city of Meroe.



**Figure 3.** Pot-burial from es-Sour.

### Stone artefacts

The majority of lithic artefacts are finished scrapers, backed tools, borers, burins, crescents and retouched and un-retouched blades. One interesting find was a small rhyolite artefact with a characteristic shape and two small hollows on both faces. Its function remains uncertain, although the shape suggests that it may have been a fine polishing/grinding tool or palette (Figure 4). The example from es-Sour is very similar to specimens found at el-Kadada (Geus 1984: 69, Figure 5), Eastern Butana and near Kassala (Marks *et al.* 1986: 47). The ground-stone sample recovered from the 2006 excavations is large. This includes disc grinders and pounders.



**Figure 4.** Small stone grinder/polisher.

### Ceramics

The main characteristic of the pottery sherds is a hard texture, good firing and polished surfaces. The decoration generally covers most of the surface, extending to near the rim or to the rim itself. The rims are simple in shape but vessel shapes at the site include a range of mainly open-mouthed vessels.

### Other artefacts

Beads made of egg-shell, bones and carnelian, lip-plugs and one ivory artefact were recorded during the course of the excavation (Figure 5). A single shell object used as a comb for decorating pottery, was also recorded. Other typical Neolithic bone artefacts such as harpoons and gouges were not found.



**Figure 5.** Lip-plugs made of bone, these tools inserted into the lips to alter their shape, they have used in Sudan as decoration since Neolithic times, and still used by some African

### Human figurines

Other finds of potential importance were 6 fragments of human figurines (Figures 6 and 7). Two of them look very similar to examples found at el-Kadada (Geus 1984: 22). Unfortunately, the upper and lower parts of the figurines are missing. The purpose of these pottery figurines remains unclear although it is often assumed that they have a religious significance.



**Figure 6.** Fragments of pottery human figurines.



**Figure 7.** A human head, with no prominent features but it looks very similar to examples found at el-Kadada (Geus 1984: 22). The hair of the figurine is decorated with a hard rippled and incised decoration.

### **Faunal remains**

Faunal remains consisted of bones of wild and domesticated animals including domesticated cattle, giraffe, buffalo as well as numerous remains of shells. This identification was carried out by Prof. Achilles Gautier who based his identifications on photographs of the remains.

### **Conclusion**

The most distinctive features of the es-Sour material are the high index of flakes, the decorative styles of the pottery, specific types of lithic artefacts and pot-burials, as well as the presence of carnelian beads and human figurines. A freshwater mollusc (Nile oyster) shells from levels between 20 and 50cm in squares C6, B13 and F7 were radiocarbon dated in the Radiocarbon Dating Laboratory of University of Waikato, New Zealand, yielding the following dates:

Wk23036: 5296±48BP: (Oxcal calibrated: 68.2%: 4230BC-4190BC and 4180BC-4040BC)

Wk23037: 5330±54BP: (Oxcal calibrated: 68.2%: 4240BC-4050BC)

Wk23038: 5180±48BP: (Oxcal calibrated: 68.2%: 4045BC-3955BC)

These dates place the site in the middle Neolithic of central Sudan and perhaps slightly earlier than the oldest dates from Kadada (GIF-5770: 5170±110 BP) (Geus 1981).

### **Acknowledgements**

I would also like to thank Ahmed Housein and Abd el Rahman I Saeed and the entire staff of the project for help and support.

### **References**

- GEUS, F. 1981. Franco-Sudanese Excavations in the Shendi Area (1980). *Nyame Akuma* (Bulletin of the Society of African Archaeologists, USA): 18: 37-40.
- 1984. *Rescuing Sudan's ancient culture*. Khartoum.
- 1991. Burial customs in the Upper Main Nile: an overview, in W.V. Davies (ed.) *Egypt and Nubia: Nubia from prehistory to Islam*: 57-73. London: British Museum Press with Egypt Exploration Society.
- MARKS, A.E., A.M. ALI & R. FATTOVICH. 1986. The archaeology of the eastern Sudan: a first look. *Archaeology* 39: 44-50.
- REINOLD, J. 1991. Néolithique soudanais: les costumes funéraires, in W.V. Davies (ed.) *Egypt and Nubia: Nubia from prehistory to Islam*: 16-29. London: British Museum Press with Egypt Exploration Society.
- SADIG, A, M. 2005. Es-Sour: a Late Neolithic site near Meroe. *Sudan and Nubia* (Sudan Archaeological Research Society Bulletin 9):40-46.

### **Authors**

**Azhari Mustafa Sadig** Department of Archaeology, University of Khartoum, Sudan (Email: [azharisadig@gmail.com](mailto:azharisadig@gmail.com))