

SUDAN & NUBIA

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Front cover: Rescuing rock art from the Sudan Archaeological Research Society's concession at the Fourth Nile Cataract. This collaborative project between the British Museum, Iveco and New Holland was undertaken in November 2007 and resulted in the removal, from the SARS concession, of over 50 boulders bearing rock art or used as rock gongs. The pyramid, offering chapel and enclosure wall from site 4-F-71 were also relocated. Here the work is being filmed by a cameraman from the Italian TV news channel Rei Due (photo D. A. Welsby).

Pottery from the Neolithic site of es-Sour (Central Sudan)

Azhari Mustafa Sadig

The site of es-Sour (16° 57.045' N / 33° 43.133' E) is located *c.* 35km from Shendi and 1.5km from the right bank of the modern Nile channel (Figure 1). It occupies an area of *c.* 176 x 90m and, whilst it is generally flat, it also forms two low mounds on its eastern side. The site has been excavated by the Department of Archaeology of the University of Khartoum, since 2005 (Azhari Mustafa Sadig 2005; 2008).

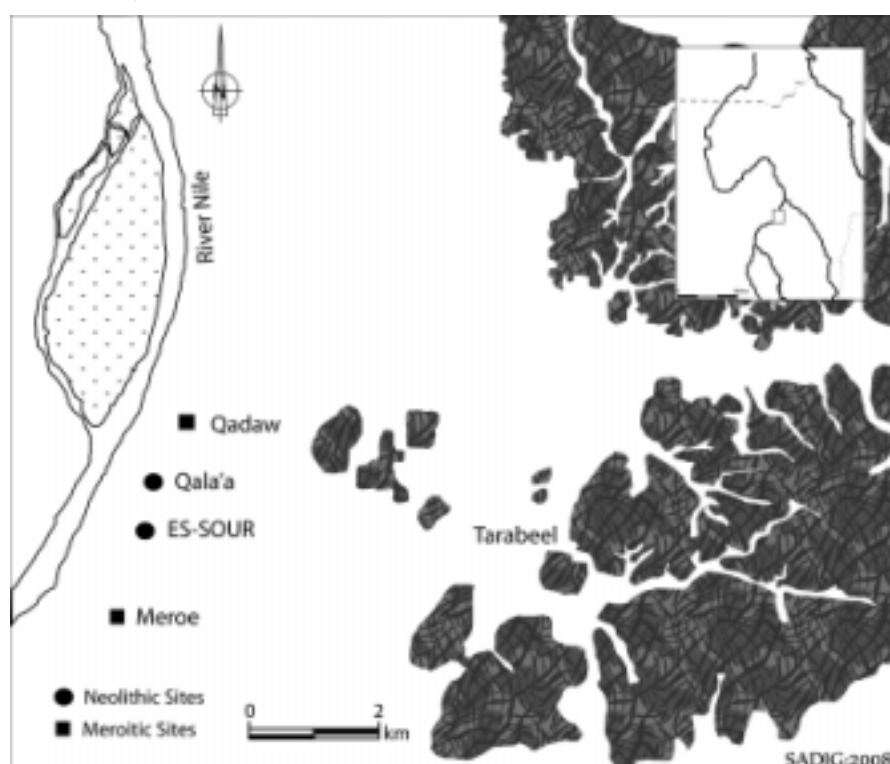


Figure 1. The location of es-Sour.

In three seasons, from 2005-2007, we excavated 15 test-pits, each 2 x 2m. The results of these excavations were extremely positive, demonstrating the existence of Neolithic occupation deposits up to 800mm deep in some places, although affected by water and wind erosion and by some later graves (Meroitic and medieval) which were cut into the site. Material from the site is similar to that recovered from el-Kadada, which lies about 30km upstream, but no associated cemetery has yet been identified at es-Sour. However, as at el-Kadada, two burials of infants, contained in large pots, were found within the settlement site (Azhari Mustafa Sadig 2005).

The settlement debris included large quantities of shells, domestic and wild animal bones, lithics, sandstone and granite

grinder fragments, pottery sherds, as well as a small number of bone and ivory tools and some human figurines.

The first radiocarbon dates for the site are now available, using freshwater mollusc (Nile oyster) shells from levels between 200mm and 500mm below the surface:

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 el-Kadada (GIF-5770: 5170±110 BP) (Geus 1981).

In this paper further data are presented on the sherd material collected during two seasons (2005-2006), with some additional preliminary comments on material collected in 2007. These comments are based on sherd counts.

The total excavated ceramic collection recovered comprised 8407 sherds, of which 4299 (51.1%) were decorated. Two complete pots were found. The first season's collection consists of 3272 body sherds, 446 rim sherds, with only one identifiable base. The second season's collection consists of 4279 body sherds, 686 rim sherds and 15 bases. The small size and poor condition of some of the sherds meant that we could not analyse all of them and a sample of 657 sherds from the first season and 1683 from the second season, are classified here, all of which are decorated.

The main characteristics of the potsherds are their hard texture, good firing and polished surfaces. The sherds range in thickness from 10-4mm, with some being polished inside and out. A coloured

polished slip was evident in some examples. The decoration generally covers most of the surface, extending to near, or to the rim itself (Figure 2). The predominant surface colour of the sherds is grey through dark grey, to brown and black. Most of the variations in colour appear to be the result of the firing process. The rims are simple in shape with vessels at the site including a range of mainly open-mouthed forms.

The prevalent vessel forms seem to be medium-size open bowls and hemispherical vessels. The two largest pots recovered, used for infant burials (Azhari Mustafa Sadig 2005), had mouth diameters of 350-400mm and were decorated with the rocker-stamp technique (Figure 3).

The sample of pottery from es-Sour was increased by

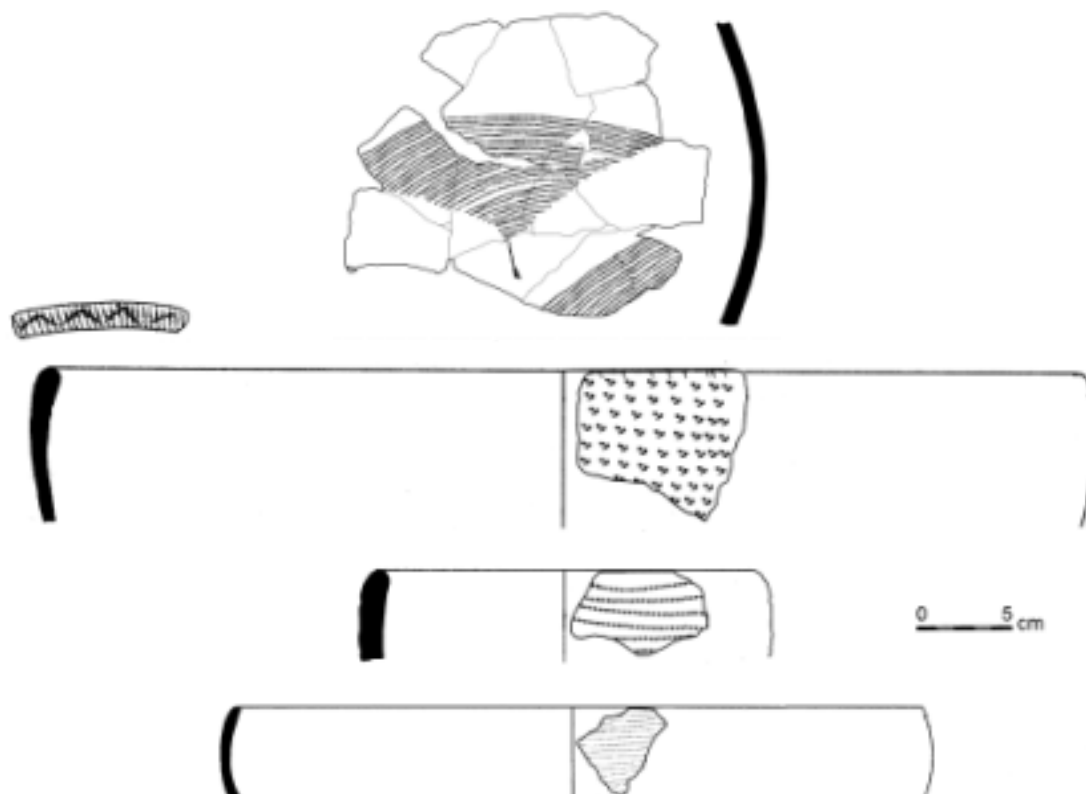


Figure 2. *Es-Sour*, decorated sherds (scale 1:4).

5178 sherds in 2006, which included more than 3000 which were diagnostic in some way. As in the previous season, most of the sherds in almost all deposits on the site are very coarse, but well fired. The decorative motifs most often employed are rocker stamps, dotted lines and other impressed decoration (Plate 1).

The undecorated sherds are often characterised by a scraped, or wiped surface, although they are often burnished. They relate mainly to quite coarse, black-topped red wares. Such black-topped red wares have been found at esh-Shaheinab (Arkell 1953, 75) and Geili (Caneva 1988, 110). They are also reported to have been quite common at Kadero (Krzyżaniak 1984), el-Kadada and among the pottery assemblage of the A-Group of Lower Nubia (Nordström 1972, 88-89) and are consistent with the relatively late date suggested for the site at es-Sour (Figure 3, C).

Classification

The ceramic collection from es-Sour included all the techniques and motif types favoured in the Khartoum Neolithic of the Central Nile Valley. A variety of techniques were employed. These include impressing, incising, rocker stamping and combing, resulting in a number of motifs. The decorated sherds from the first season are classified by the motifs set out in Figure 4.

Figure 4 demonstrates that the favourite decorative technique at the Neolithic site of es-Sour is the rocker stamp, in all its varieties (Plate 1). This accounts for more than 60% of the total, whilst impressed technique accounts for more than 19.5%. Incised lines make up 8.4% of the total, whilst the rest accounts for 12.1%. There is clearly scope for comparing the relative predominance of various decorative techniques with collections from other sites, as some significant variation can already be identified, which seems likely to



Plate 1. *Es-Sour*. Sherds with rocker-zigzag dotted, straight lines and rocker-zigzag, incised, curved lines.

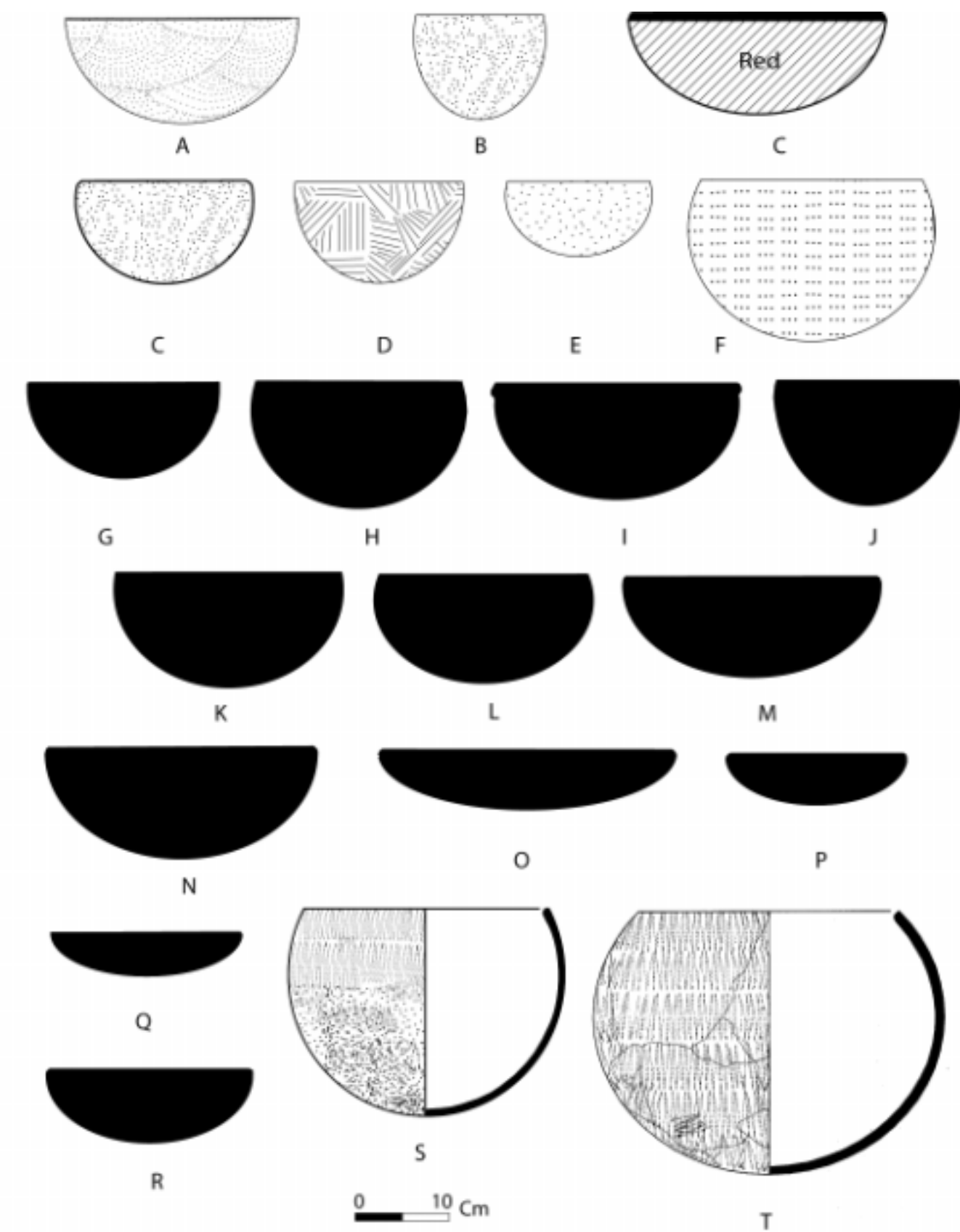


Figure 3. Es-Sour: principal vessel shapes are reconstructed from specific sherds. (A - curvilinear, B, C, E and F - impressed dots, C - red pottery with black-topped rim, D - incisions. S and T were used for burials.

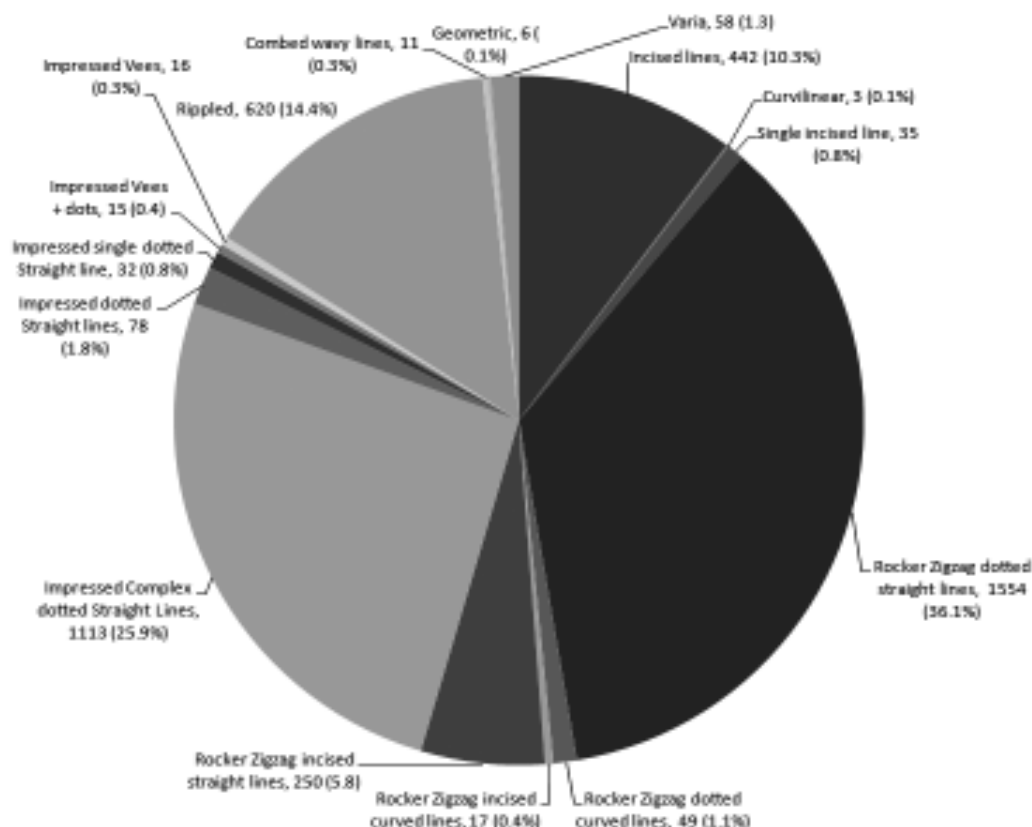


Figure 4. Es-Sour, percentages of different motifs utilised on the pottery (2005, 2006 and 2007 seasons).

reflect chronological differences, with, for example, rocker stamping comprising 45% at Geili, 58-72% at Nofalab, and 50% at esh-Shaheinab but only 36% at Kadero.

One significant element of the es-Sour material is the rippled pottery (Colour plate I). It comprises about 14.4% of the collection. This type of decoration is an indicator of the late Neolithic (*c.* 3800-3000 BC) of Central Sudan. Rippled ware is known from the Badarian (*c.* 4000 BC) in Upper Egypt, and the Terminal Abkan (3200 BC) in Nubia (Bietak 1986). Significant quantities of rippled pottery have also been reported from el-Kadada, where it comprised about 60% of all vessel forms (Reinold 1987, 33-34; 2008, 197).

The character of the pottery assemblage from es-Sour needs to be further explored, not least because so much of our published comparative data relates to assemblages derived from cemeteries (e.g. el-Kadada or el-Ghaba), which cannot be seen as 'typical' and may differ significantly from those from settlement sites. The relative abundance of pottery and good preservation of much of it, provides an excellent opportunity to increase our understanding of the range of Neolithic pottery in use on settlements sites during this period.

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*Colour plate I. Es-Sour:
Rippled decoration. Most of
these sherds are from small
bowls.*



Examining the inscription of Thutmose III on Tombos Island (photo: D. A. Welsby).