

KUSHITES AT ABYDOS: A VIEW FROM UMM EL-QAAB

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Anthony Leahy broke new ground for several major research questions concerning Abydos — for example the famous “Osirian Bed” — but also Late Period monuments and activities. Since we both have a common interest in Kushites and Abydos, and also because Tony was kindly chairing my first international paper about a Kushite family from Thebes back at the International Congress of Egyptologists in Grenoble, this contribution aims to express my high respect and gratitude for someone who has stimulated the discussion of Late Period Abydos until the present day.

Introduction

The important role of Abydos during the Twenty-fifth Dynasty has been illustrated by Anthony Leahy in several seminal papers.¹ Recently, he re-discussed the question of Kushite burials at the site.² He could convincingly show that not only female,³ but also masculine members of the royal family were interred at Abydos. It is significant that Prince Ptahmaakheru is now the only son of a Kushite ruler whose burial place in Egypt has been documented without doubt.⁴ As Leahy put it, these Kushite interments at Abydos need to be seen in light of the importance of rituals and votive offerings for the god Osiris.⁵ Offering pottery from Umm el-Qaab provides first hand evidence for Kushite evocations of the god of the dead and will be discussed below.

The significance of Umm el-Qaab

Umm el-Qaab, the burial ground of the Proto- and Early Dynastic kings, once again gained special importance from the Middle Kingdom onwards. Possibly as early as in the Thirteenth Dynasty, the tomb of king Djer of the First Dynasty was re-interpreted as the burial place of the god Osiris himself and

¹ LEAHY 1990; LEAHY 1994; LEAHY 2007; LEAHY 2014.

² LEAHY 2014.

³ See PRIESE 1968: 177–179; WENIG 1990; LEAHY 1994; LOHWASSER 2001: 79–80; BUDKA 2010c: 338–339; BUDKA 2012.

⁴ LEAHY 2014: 70. For a possible Theban burial of the princes and high priests of Amun Harmakhis and Harkheb, see BUDKA 2010d: 514.

⁵ LEAHY 2014: 86–87.

equipped with the famous “Osirian bed”.⁶ Since 2006, a new project directed by Ute Effland focusses on the cultic activities at Umm el-Qaab that post-date the Early Dynastic period and are connected with Osiris.⁷

The pottery at Umm el-Qaab attests to cultic activities from the late Old Kingdom throughout all ages up to Ptolemaic, Roman and Coptic times. According to the ceramics, one of the heydays of the cult for Osiris at Umm el-Qaab was clearly the Twenty-fifth Dynasty.⁸ Recent fieldwork by the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo resulted in a considerable increase in understanding the nature, date, size and variability of *in situ* pottery deposits in the surroundings of the tomb of Djer/Osiris datable to the Kushite period.⁹

Votive pottery of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty

The votive pottery of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty illustrates cultic activities at Umm el-Qaab and the use of processional routes connected with the cult of Osiris. Despite the long tradition of votive offerings around the royal tombs of the Early Dynastic period, the Kushite period marks the beginning of some specific vessel shapes. The most significant new type is the so-called *qaab* which continued into the Ptolemaic era.¹⁰ The *qaab*, responsible for the modern name of the site Umm el-Qaab (“Mother of Pots”), recalls miniature vessels of the Middle Kingdom and in some respects also canopic jars.¹¹ The only close parallel for this specific vessel type outside of Abydos can be found at the royal Kushite necropolis of Nuri (Fig. 1).¹² It is reasonable to assume that these cups, primarily used for foundation deposits in the Kushite pyramids, are copies of the *qaabs* from Abydos. This implies that people with first-hand experience of ritual activities in Twenty-fifth Dynasty Umm el-Qaab passed on their knowledge in order to shape Kushite funerary traditions.

At Umm el-Qaab, an *in situ* deposit of *qaabs* in the surroundings of the tomb of Khasekhemwy illustrates that the vessels were carefully laid out reflecting organised votive activities embedded in the yearly festival of Osiris. Organic remains as contents of the *qaabs* strongly point to Osiris as the god of vegetation, but especially to the aspects of regeneration and fertility.¹³

Apart from the *qaabs*, a specific type of storage vessel, the so-called Late Period bottles are most common during the Twenty-fifth Dynasty at Umm

⁶ LEAHY 1977. See also EFFLAND, BUDKA and EFFLAND 2010; EFFLAND and EFFLAND 2013.

⁷ EFFLAND, BUDKA and EFFLAND 2010; EFFLAND and EFFLAND 2013.

⁸ BUDKA 2010a: 57–58; BUDKA 2010b: 51–52.

⁹ BUDKA 2014b.

¹⁰ MÜLLER 2006a: 82; BUDKA 2010a: 45.

¹¹ Cf. BUDKA 2010a: 58.

¹² DUNHAM 1955: 125, fig. 125 (Nu. 9); 157, fig. 118 (Nu. 10); pls. CXXXIV–CXXXV. See also PUMPENMEIER 1998: 134; BUDKA 2010a: 45–46.

¹³ EFFLAND 2010: 29–30.

el-Qaab. These large bottles are a very special type of vessel, clearly locally made, produced in very large numbers and arranged to form two parallel rows marking pathways.¹⁴ Until recently, no traces of any content within the bottles were observed, suggesting that they were deposited empty.¹⁵ However, the recent discovery of an enormous ceramic deposit at the tomb of Djer allows an updated assessment of Kushite votive activity at Umm el-Qaab.

A new deposit at the tomb of Djer/Osiris

The first vessels were unearthed in 2011 along the eastern edge of the subsidiary tombs of Djer. They were recognised as being related to the row of vessels found well preserved in the area before the tomb of Den by Naville¹⁶ and by Müller,¹⁷ leading towards the south, to the “southern hill”.¹⁸ In 2012 and 2013, more vessels of this deposit labelled O-NNO (Fig. 2) were unearthed — it became obvious that the deposit excavated in 1985 above B40¹⁹ was probably once part of O-NNO in its south-eastern area.

Out of 3806 sherds, a total amount of 2686 vessels was reconstructed for O-NNO — the actual number of deposited vessels was probably even larger, as parts of the deposit were disturbed in antiquity.²⁰ The most important vessel types fall into the two categories of closed and open forms. 24 % are storage vessels of types already well attested at Umm el-Qaab — the so-called Late Period bottles.²¹ More than 2000 pieces are various types of *qaabs*;²² in addition, a few other dishes and incense burners are present.

Several references to rituals were observed in O-NNO.²³ First of all, a large number of “killing holes” (intentional perforations of vessels executed post-firing) was recognised. Secondly, several traces of irregular red paint, possibly also with an apotropaic character, were documented on various types of vessels, both on *qaabs* as well as Late Period bottles. Ritual killing holes of vessels are also attested within embalming deposits at Thebes.²⁴ In general, the context of “killed” pottery vessels in ancient Egypt and Sudan is diverse and ranges from embalming caches, burial chambers, shafts and tomb superstructures to settlement deposits. Datable examples span from the Old Kingdom to Ptolemaic

¹⁴ BUDKA 2010b: 56–57.

¹⁵ Cf. BUDKA 2010b: 55.

¹⁶ NAVILLE 1914: 38, pl. XVIII.4 and pl. XIX.1.

¹⁷ MÜLLER 2006b: 39–48.

¹⁸ EFFLAND and EFFLAND 2010: 138.

¹⁹ Published by ASTON 1996.

²⁰ See BUDKA 2014b.

²¹ BUDKA 2010b: 57, fig. 16.

²² BUDKA 2010a: 44, fig. 23; BUDKA 2014b: 58, fig. 5.

²³ BUDKA 2014b: 57.

²⁴ Cf. BUDKA 2006: 96.

times and originate from Lower and Upper Egypt as far upstream as the Fourth Cataract in Nubia.²⁵ The ritual breaking of pottery is a widespread funerary practice attested in various cultures throughout the world.²⁶ Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the smashing of vessels, and here of red vessels, is also attested in Kushite context, at the royal cemetery at Kurru. This funeral ritual during the early Kushite period has been much discussed in the last few decades.²⁷ Certain parallels between Kurru and Abydos are striking and imply close connections between these sites and associated personnel/priests.

Coming back to Umm el-Qaab and O-NNO, it is significant for understanding the process of depositing votive vessels during the Twenty-fifth Dynasty that there are — for the first time — traces of contents inside the Late Period bottles of O-NNO, which were previously assumed to have been deposited empty. Complete examples and fragments of *qaab*-dishes and remains of their filling (botanical remains and sand) were discovered. Thus, for the first time, the deposition of the large bottles can be directly associated with the ritual deposition of *qaabs*.²⁸ Because the contents of the *qaabs* are identical with what was documented in the *in situ* deposits, a similar ritual framework embedded into the calendar of the Osiris cult seems likely. The association of the *qaabs* with the Late Period bottles is therefore of great importance for understanding the process of depositing the vessels. In some cases, the votive dishes were obviously positioned in already laid out storage vessels. In other cases, small groups of *qaabs* were put next to the Late Period bottles.²⁹ Here, an unusual feature of one of these *qaab* assemblages within O-NNO was recognised: from 16 dishes, one is not of Late Period date, but rather an Early Dynastic lid.³⁰ Therefore, old and new vessels were used side by side within a pottery votive deposit of the Eighth Century BC. The Early Dynastic lid is probably a piece from the original burial of Djer and it was obviously ritually appropriate for the votive offerings to Osiris more than 2000 years later.

References to the original tomb contents seem to be important aspects for understanding the complex composition of the Late Period votive pottery at Umm el-Qaab. The so-called Late Period bottles seem to recall ovoid jars from the Pre- and Early Dynastic tombs.³¹ There was obviously the clear wish to connect to and to physically continue the original inventory for Osiris Djer.³²

²⁵ Cf. BUDKA 2010c: 407–409; BUDKA 2014a.

²⁶ YELLIN 1995: 247.

²⁷ See BUDKA 2014a.

²⁸ See, however, pit A 4 with a Late Period bottle and several *qaabs* excavated at the Heqareshu hill; PUMPENMEIER 1998: 134.

²⁹ BUDKA 2014b: 62–63, figs. 15–17.

³⁰ BUDKA 2014b: 63, fig. 17.

³¹ BUDKA 2010a: 60.

³² BUDKA 2014b: 56–65.

This might be explained in a similar manner as the Kushite preferences for ‘archaism’ in relief and sculpture.³³

Votive pottery marking processional routes at Abydos

The votive pottery at Umm el-Qaab can be associated with deposits at other locations and landmarks throughout the site of Abydos. It becomes obvious that the vessels marked the main cultic axes constructing the sacred landscape of Abydos as the processional ways during the festival for Osiris. This can be illustrated by a deposit at the Seti I complex. As one of the major buildings in Abydos, this temple complex³⁴ features a so-called desert pylon in its western part, opening the mud brick enclosure towards Umm el-Qaab and clearly connecting the monument to the presumed tomb of Osiris in the desert. Interestingly, in front of this western pylon there is a large deposit of votive pottery.³⁵ Based on a surface check, this pottery mainly dates to the Late Period, especially to the Twenty-fifth Dynasty. Thus, the area behind the Osireion was of importance during the Kushite era.

Investigations by Ute and Andreas Effland have clearly shown that there are several important connections between North Abydos, Umm el-Qaab, the Seti I complex and also South Abydos. A significant landmark at Umm el-Qaab was the so-called “southern hill”,³⁶ which was probably also the focus of the O-NNO deposit.³⁷ All in all, the Twenty-fifth Dynasty obviously re-used already existing structures and revived processional features set up during the New Kingdom. A similar Kushite re-construction of the sacred landscape can be observed at Thebes.³⁸ The underlying concepts for this were the conscious references to earlier periods also known as ‘archaism’³⁹ and especially the wish to legitimise Kushite rulers by embedding them and their monuments into previous traditions.

Royal ancestor cult

References on Kushite monuments at Abydos to earlier periods lead to the question of royal ancestor worship which is frequently associated with the site. The most impressive relic of the Middle Kingdom re-modification of the tomb of Djer is the “Osirian Bed”, representing a mortuary bed with the recumbent

³³ Cf. BUDKA 2010a: 60 with further literature.

³⁴ O’CONNOR 2009: 43–61; SCHRÖDER 2010: 104 with further references.

³⁵ EFFLAND, EFFLAND 2010: 142.

³⁶ EFFLAND, BUDKA and EFFLAND 2010: 82–83, fig. 52; EFFLAND and EFFLAND 2010: 137–139.

³⁷ EFFLAND and EFFLAND 2013: 78, figs. 1–2; BUDKA 2014b.

³⁸ BUDKA 2010b: 60–61 with references.

³⁹ Cf. TIRADRITTI 2008; MORKOT 2014.

Osiris.⁴⁰ This bed, and especially texts and reliefs from the temple of Seti I at Abydos, illustrate the main theme of the Osirian cult: the regeneration of the god, his awakening from a passive mode and impregnating Isis are all essential for the cosmic cycle as well as the royal and the funerary cult.⁴¹

References to royal ancestors' cult and royal succession are specific for Abydos and can be illustrated, for example, with the complex of Ahmose and the pyramid for Tetisheri,⁴² but also the famous kings list from the Seti I temple.⁴³ Reflections of ancestor cults may go back as early as to the First Dynasty,⁴⁴ although this has been questioned by some scholars.⁴⁵ All in all, I agree with Ute Effland that ancestor cults might be viewed as the most important "cult-impact"⁴⁶ for the site, also during the Twenty-fifth Dynasty.⁴⁷

The Kushite focus on Abydos

The deposit O-NNO at Umm el-Qaab forms an integral part of the sacred landscape shaped during the Twenty-fifth Dynasty at Abydos. Following major landmarks from earlier periods, especially the complex of Seti I with the Osireion, the Kushites also activated the old processional way through the large wadi. Burials of Kushites discovered at Cemetery D towards the north of this wadi⁴⁸ and monuments such as the stelae recently identified by Leahy as Kushite dedications,⁴⁹ further support the prominence of ceremonies associated with Osiris and his burial place at Umm el-Qaab during the Twenty-fifth Dynasty.⁵⁰

The familiarity and involvement of the Kushite rulers, their officials, priests, architects and artists with the site of Abydos and its monuments left clear traces in the building activity in Kush. The much-debated form of the underground rooms of the pyramid of Taharqa at Nuri can only be explained with a high degree of knowledge of the Osireion at Abydos.⁵¹ It is noteworthy that the pyramid of Taharqa is not the only monument of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty recalling the Osirian sanctuary at the back of the Seti I complex. In 1984 Dieter Eigner stressed the reflections of the Abydene monument in certain sets of

⁴⁰ LEAHY 1977; EFFLAND, BUDKA and EFFLAND 2010: 33–35.

⁴¹ See O'CONNOR 2009: 31–41 and, most recently, ROBERSON 2013.

⁴² HARVEY 1996; O'CONNOR 2009: 105–110.

⁴³ KEMP 1989: 21–22; EFFLAND 2014: 27.

⁴⁴ See DREYER 1996: 72–73, fig. 26.

⁴⁵ DREYER 1996: 73; WENGROW 2006: 131.

⁴⁶ EFFLAND 2013: 324–326.

⁴⁷ Cf. REVEZ 2010 for an adaption of the Osirian myth for the Kushite royal succession under Taharqa.

⁴⁸ See BUDKA 2012 with further references.

⁴⁹ LEAHY 2014.

⁵⁰ See EFFLAND and EFFLAND 2013: 78–79.

⁵¹ See KENDALL 2008.

rooms within the subterranean structures of the Theban temple-tombs in the Asasif,⁵² for example in the tomb of Montuemhat who had very close relations with the Kushite court⁵³ and who left two important rock inscriptions at Abydos, illustrating his visit to the site.⁵⁴

The references to Abydos and the Osireion also correspond to the general focus on Osiris during the First Millennium BC, which markedly increased during the Twenty-fifth Dynasty.⁵⁵ In my perspective, it is also no coincidence that the only known burial places of Kushites in Egypt — Thebes and Abydos — are also sites with a long tradition of pyramid building. Most essential, however, for the Kushite focus on Abydos, was the importance of Osiris for royal legitimacy⁵⁶ and the possibility to relate to key concepts of the Egyptian funerary tradition, which were consequently “translated” into a specific Nubian version — traces of which can be found, among others, in the use of Osirian “qaabs” at Nuri.

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⁵² EIGNER 1984: 163–183; see also BUDKA 2010c: 71 and 78.

⁵³ See LECLANT 1961; BUDKA 2010c: 65 with further references in note 346. Also remarkable is the “Osirian monumental tomb” section of TT 33, see here most recently TRAUNECKER 2014: 217–221. For the importance of the “Osirian tomb” in the funerary tradition see also QUACK 2009: 607.

⁵⁴ See EFFLAND and EFFLAND 2013: 81.

⁵⁵ See BUDKA 2010c: 476–477.

⁵⁶ It is probably not a coincidence that among the Kushite rulers especially Taharqa had major difficulties with his legitimacy after complications around his succession; see most recently TÖRÖK 2015: 36–37.

- J. BUDKA, Kushite Tomb Groups in Late Period Thebes, in W. GODLEWSKI and A. ŁAJTAR (eds), *Between the Cataracts. Proceedings of the 11th International Conference of Nubian Studies, Warsaw University, 27 August–2 September 2006, Part Two: Session Papers* (Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean Supplement Series 2.2/2), Warsaw, 2010d, 503–518.
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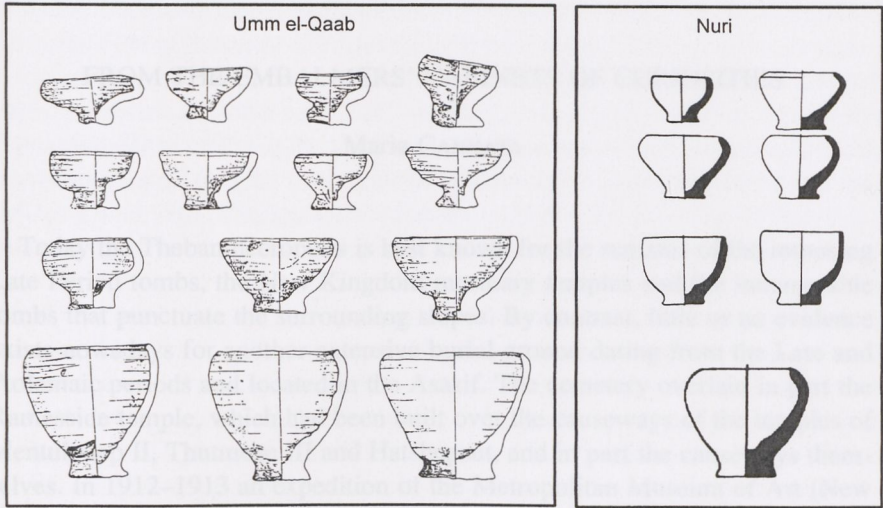


Fig. 1. *Qaabs* from Umm el-Qaab, tomb of Osiris (Budka, Osiris cult project) and from Nuri, foundation deposits (after DUNHAM 1955: 125, fig. 125 (Nu. 9); 157, fig. 118 (Nu. 10)).



Fig. 2. Rows of offering vessels of O-NNO, leading towards the “southern hill” (© photo U. Effland).