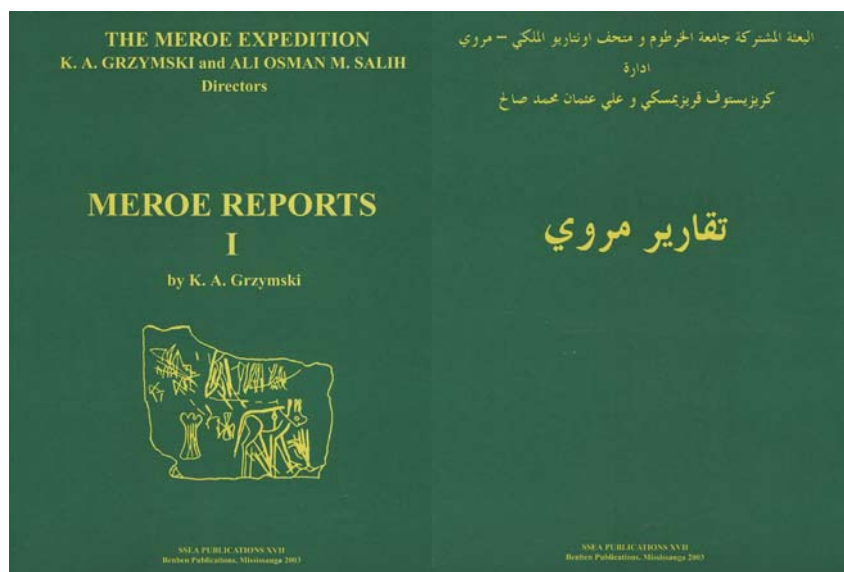


Grzymski, K.A. 2003. **Meroe Reports I. – Mississauga, Benben publications (SSEA Publications XVII)**

Book review by P.J. Rose



This volume, best understood as a series of separate papers dealing with various aspects of the archaeology of Meroe rather than a single, narrowly-focussed, volume, presents the results of the joint Khartoum-Toronto mission to Meroe for the 2000-2001 season, jointly directed by Ali Osman Salih and the author of the present volume. It is good to see such rapid and detailed publication of fieldwork, and a new addition to the literature concerning Meroe is always worthwhile, whilst highlighting the difficulties resulting from the activities of a series of different archaeological missions to the site.

The main aim of this phase of the project was to carry out a preliminary reconnaissance prior to future work (encompassing excavation, conservation, and public presentation and access), a praiseworthy and restrained approach. One of the main components of the work was, simply, the examination of the remains on the ground, with small-scale clearance, and their comparison with published works. It is striking, and disturbing, to realise that this does not seem to have been carried out in a particularly rigorous manner previously, and it has clearly paid off in its results, leading to a number of significant discoveries, especially in the Amun temple (M 260). It is less clear why excavation, albeit on a very small scale, was undertaken at this stage when surface assessment with minimal archaeological intervention was proving so fruitful.

The volume contains chapters (which are somewhat oddly numbered, so that the introduction constitutes chapter 5 of the report) on the background to work at the site; a review of investigations in the Amun temple (M 260) and its forecourt (M271), and within the Royal City; a report on new excavations on mound M 712; the pottery and finds, principally from the M 712 excavations; a list of objects from Garstang's excavations now in the Sudan National Museum and the Royal Ontario Museum; and a paper returning to an earlier interest of Grzymski's, the assessment of the size of the population of Meroe.

The introduction provides a useful resumé of past research and sometimes its shortcomings, and includes a succinct summary of past and present grids and building designations. It then introduces three very brief periods of fieldwork, of less than two months in all, and the discoveries derived therefrom.

The history of excavation and research in the Amun temple is presented in more detail in the following chapter, and this is followed by a detailed description of the work carried out by the Khartoum-Toronto mission. This was intended mainly to clarify known ambiguities from earlier sources, but led to interesting new discoveries. 'Excavation' was limited to small scale clearance of spoil heaps, sand and rubble in order to carry out proper documentation. Plans of the temple and forecourt are presented, along with several more detailed drawings; the inclusion of more drawings would however have clarified (at least for this reader) verbal descriptions of features which are not of themselves clear (as, to choose a single example, the reference on p. 9 to ledges and recesses in a series of overlying blocks in the south side of the main gate [AT1]). Scale drawings would have reduced the need for the inclusion in the text of detailed measurement of the blocks, course by course. Finally, a commentary discusses architectural parallels, and the dating of the temple. The results of the Khartoum-Toronto mission have clearly contributed to the latter discussion, by making it clear that the temple complex is independent of the enclosure wall of the Royal City, and thus that the date of the latter does not provide a *terminus post quem* for the former. It also makes clear that the temple complex grew in size over time;

the addition of the forecourt M 271 is certainly established; and Grzymiski further speculates about other additions within the rest of the complex, resulting in several constructional phases. Shinnie's field notes for 1983 to 1984 are reproduced as an appendix to the chapter since some of the original documentation could not be included in Shinnie-Anderson (2002).

Two C14 dates were obtained from material uncovered in the course of the work in the Amun temple; unfortunately the tables showing the calibration curve and data for these seem to have been reversed, so that the date given on p. 12 comes from table 6.1 not table 6.2 as stated in the text (this is clear from the location data quoted at the bottom of the table), and that on p. 15 is taken from table 6.2 not table 6.1. The use of the C14 data is loose, to put it mildly; on p. 12, the results do not suggest 'a c. AD 250 date' – rather they suggest a date of 220-350 AD at 68% probability. To quote the intercept date is misleading. The p. 15 date of 'about AD 340 (95% probability)' is also unjustified: this probability range is 250-420 AD, as the table clearly shows, and as it is correctly quoted on p.17.

The following chapter details the results of a small excavation carried out on a mound to the south-east of the Amun temple, M 712. This does not fit into the framework of surface investigation and limited clearance as outlined in the introduction, but is a research exercise, intended to establish whether the mound covers a further religious building facing onto the access to the Amun temple, or whether it represents the northern extremity of the known area of domestic habitation to the south, the south mound. The results suggest that the latter is certainly the case, whilst there remains the possibility that one wall (85) of Level VI may represent the rear of a more formal structure extending to the north. Implicitly from the text there was also an interest in establishing whether there was evidence of post-Meroitic occupation here; the occurrence of post-Meroitic occupation on the north mound had been noted by the Khartoum-Calgary expedition, although not otherwise documented.

The report acknowledges the difficulties of presenting a coherent picture of settlement development in a densely occupied area, where architectural modifications were occurring more or less continuously, and where it is usually impossible to establish connections between changes taking place in different parts of the area. As a result, the phasing – here separated into six 'Levels', a plan of each of which is given – must be to some extent an artificial construct. The writer does his best to compare the levels thus distinguished with the various sequences ('components' and their subdivisions) proposed by earlier excavators facing a similar difficulty, with interesting results bearing on the presence, or in this case, absence, of post-Meroitic remains. Each level is described in some detail. The descriptions are not always entirely clear when related to the plans: for example, in discussing post-holes cut into wall 31 in Level IV, two are said possibly to function as door-posts for stairs (p. 38). These stairs are not otherwise described under Level IV (unless the 'platform-like constructions', contexts 32 and 52 are meant, but they appear too distant and none of the illustrated post-holes align with them), and are not identifiable on the plan. Occasionally, context labels are omitted from the relevant plans, and features cited in the text as relating to one level appear on different level plans (thus wall 48 is cited as belonging to Level IV, but appears on the Level V plan; wall 19 of level III is shown on the Level IV plan. Wall 90, initially quoted in Level V as overlying Level V remains, later in the same paragraph is quoted as one of the defining walls of an area of this period, although it is later stated to belong to Level III). A brief summary of the finds from each level is given; further details of these appear in chapter 9. Two C14 dates were obtained, both belonging to Level II, a series of late unconnected contexts representing flimsy and impoverished 'squatter' occupation. The commentary discusses the question of the 'end of Meroe' and post-Meroitic settlement, and how the M 712 results contribute to this. Grzymiski notes the lack of post-Meroitic remains, and suggests that a decline in occupation began in the mid 3rd century AD (earlier than the usual assessment). The evidence as cited here – the C14 dates and pottery – cannot really be construed to give such a precise date, although the apparent decline certainly belongs sometime in the Late Meroitic period. A full list of contexts ends the chapter; for the complex stratigraphy involved a matrix would have been a useful addition, since comparison of the two published sections with the context list shows that at least some fills covered a wider area than their descriptions suggest. An appendix on a small number of animal bones from M 712 by C.S. Churcher follows; it would have been useful to know whether these represented the sum total of what was found, or, if not, why they were selected for study.

Work in the Royal City returns to the original expedition brief. Its intention was to assess the preservation of the remains, and again 'ground truthing' led to a number of observations which supplemented and in some cases corrected earlier publications. A verbal description of two of the palace enclosures (M 294 and M 295) is given. Plans of the buildings would have been helpful for visualisation of the new features noted.

Chapter 9 presents the pottery and small finds, mainly from M 712. The text states explicitly that the report is intended to make the material available, rather than to present a detailed analysis of it, and this must be borne in mind when considering what follows.

For the pottery, Grzymiski notes the comparative corpora available for the material and comments on them. He pays particular attention to the lack of standardisation amongst fabric descriptions from the sites, and goes on to draw his own equivalences between the Meroe fabrics as defined by Shinnie & Bradley (which system he chooses to maintain) and Edwards' classification from Musawwarat es-Sofra. As this reviewer has

some familiarity with pottery of the Nile valley, I would register some hesitation about accepting these apparently easily-drawn equivalences: drawing such conclusions, as the author apparently does, purely from verbal descriptions, is fraught with difficulty and rarely as straightforward as it seems. This is not to say that the equivalences are incorrect, but written descriptions can rarely convey sufficient information to allow certainty of similarity. In fact, the author goes on to make this clear by citing another of the Musawwarat es-Sofra pottery analysts' (Seiler's) own concordance between the two sites, which differs from Grzymski's. One can but echo Grzymski's plea for a concordance of fabrics from sites in Central Sudan: this will, however, only be convincingly achieved by bringing together actual samples for study, never by working from published descriptions. Furthermore, the size of the area in question and its varied geology makes it likely that the material will not group into a small number of (relatively) neat categories such as Adams identified in Lower Nubia, or the IAEP group established for Ancient Egyptian ceramics.

The reviewer found the description of the concordance between the earlier Khartoum-Calgary work and the current work, intended (I think) to associate forms with fabrics, somewhat ambiguous. Within the catalogue itself, such fabric descriptions as are given are usually based on the Khartoum-Calgary system, but are not applied consistently. Fabrics are noted sometimes in the introductory text to the 'form class', sometimes in the individual descriptions, sometimes not at all, and sometimes are described in terms such as 'red fabric', or 'pink fabric with numerous straw inclusions'. It would have been useful, firstly, to reproduce the Khartoum-Calgary descriptions, so that anyone using the corpus could have the relevant information to hand, and so that, as the author intends, the material really is readily accessible to anyone wanting to use it, and also to define why, for example, 'red fabric' does not fit into any of the known classifications. Further, consistency in other elements of the description would have been helpful. Sometimes a piece is described as 'red', others are 'red-slipped'. Is there a difference in meaning between these descriptions?

I am puzzled as to why the author chose to calculate the minimum number of vessels for the material. This is usually carried out by his form classes, although the sherds come from different levels, so belong to different periods (this is emphasised by the very useful, and too rarely done elsewhere, presentation of the drawings twice, once by form class and once by level). Also, the form classes themselves group together vessels which, although of a generally similar character such as 'saucers or lids', 'large open bowls and jars', 'amphorae' etc., are of manifestly different shapes, and patently reflect different vessels. This is most immediately noticeable amongst the finewares, for which a brief examination of the drawings shows that there were a far larger number of vessels represented than that given by the calculation of minimum vessel numbers. I cannot think what useful information these figures are intended to provide. The objects are classified by material and listed with brief descriptions and illustrations of some pieces.

The final two chapters are only loosely connected with the main body of the report. Chapter 10 presents lists of objects from Garstang's excavations at Meroe in the Sudan National Museum and the Royal Ontario Museum by museum registration number, with some cross references to Garstang's publications and occasionally those of other scholars. Chapter 11 returns to an earlier interest of the author, the calculation of the size of population of Meroe and the Meroitic state by various methods. This is clearly of interest (particularly the suggestion that the relatively large size of the Meroitic population in relation to that of Egypt may have been part of its perceived threat), but the paper does not sit easily in this volume. The attempt to incorporate the discoveries at M 712 into the argument, by quoting the house plans in M 712 as showing that Meroitic houses did not include open areas, thus making difficult the application of modern population estimates based on the roofed area of housing, since modern houses include substantial open courts, is limited by the fact that too little was exposed in M 712 for us to be sure of any house layout.

This is, as already stated, a useful addition to the literature on Meroe, and contains important new discoveries, especially those resulting from the examination of the site surface. The excavations themselves, on such a limited scale, can only be treated as a preliminary statement preceding larger, more interpretable (one hopes) exposures, and it may have been better to hold fire on the publication of these results until both a wider area had been excavated, and more analysis had been carried out on the finds. It is, for example, frustrating to see that neither the sherds of Eastern Sigillata nor other imports have been dated and the information fed back into the site interpretation. There are the makings of a substantially more interesting report on the excavations when this has been done.

Grzymski, K.A. 2003. *Meroe Reports I. – Mississauga, Benben publications (SSEA Publications XVII)*. 174 pp. ISBN 0920168183. Price £30.00 (paperback).

Cited literature

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