



## **Beads and warriors. The cemetery at Hagar el-Beida 2 (Sudan)**

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# BEADS AND WARRIORS. THE CEMETERY AT HAGAR EL-BEIDA 2 (SUDAN)

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**Abstract:** A complex of tumuli cemeteries dating to the first centuries AD was discovered in the vicinity of Hagar el-Beida village located in the region of the Fourth Nile Cataract. In two seasons in 2005, 24 tombs were explored on one of these sites (HB2). The bodies of the deceased were richly equipped, including bracelets and finger rings, but primarily strings of beads wound around the necks and hips. The beads were made of a variety of materials: faience, various stones, glass and ostrich eggshell.

**Keywords:** Hagar el-Beida, personal adornment, Meroitic and post-Meroitic period, burial

The cemetery of Hagar el-Beida 2 (HB2) is one of a few dozen archaeological sites concentrated in the desert around the village of Hagar el-Beida in the western part of a section about 45 km long of the western bank of the Nile, explored by Polish teams under a license granted to the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw as part of the archaeological salvage project in the region of the Fourth Nile Cataract. The concession covered the river valley and the adjacent desert extending between the localities of Shemkiya and el-Ganaet (Krzyżaniak *et alii* 2005).

Hagar el-Beida 2 is part of a large complex of tumuli fields located in the neighborhood of the village [Fig. 1]. The natural borders of the site are set by an extensive wadi where 77 tumuli burials were recorded during the field survey [Fig. 2]. Three distinct groups of graves could be discerned:

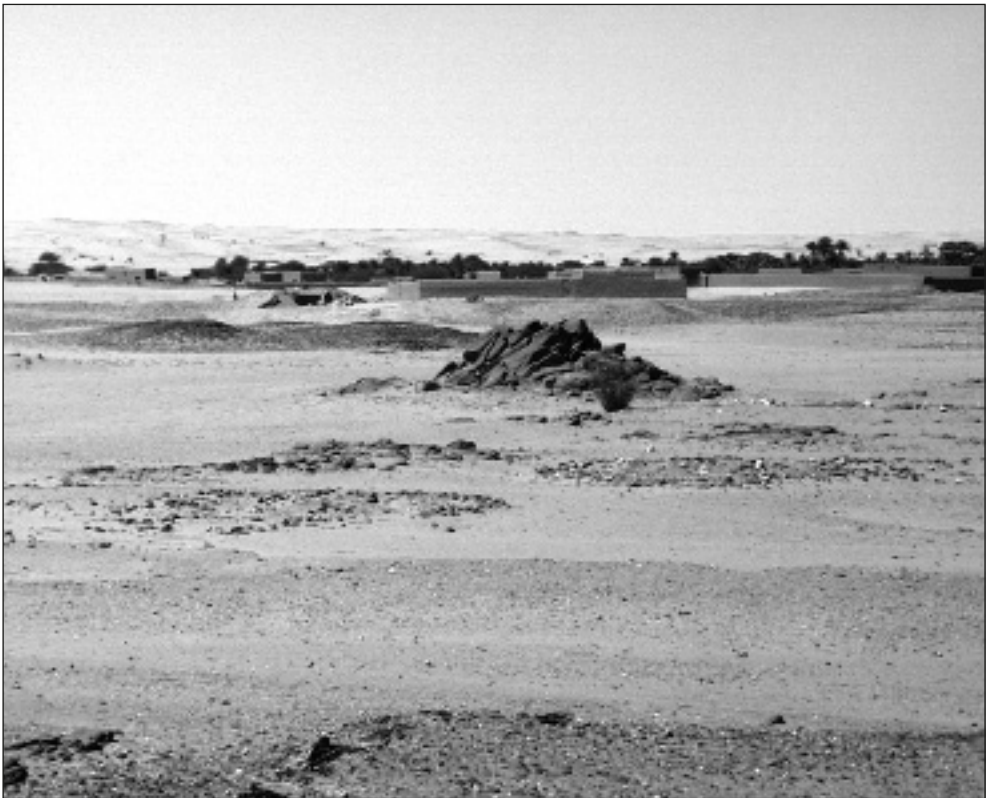
48 tumuli in the eastern group, 13 in the northern one and 16 in the western one. After two seasons of excavations in 2005, altogether 24 tumuli were explored, seven in the northern group and 17 in the eastern one. Preliminary analysis of the ceramic material and tumulus structure set the date for these burials in the Late and Post-Meroitic period (Longa 2006; 2008; 2009).

The tumuli were silt-and-gravel mounds representing two kinds of superstructures, one with a scattering of loose pebbles over the entire surface and the other ringed with stones. The shape of the stone ring fell into three distinct categories: oval, ellipsoid and ovoid or egg-shaped. The tomb substructure proved to be equally varied. Burial shafts were mostly vertical, shaped like an oval in horizontal section, with or without a step. In two cases out of 24, the shaft was rectangular. Burial chambers commonly took on the form of niches oriented E-W

or more seldom N–S, located at the bottom of the shaft to the side. Sporadically these chambers took on rectangular shape and were excavated in the bottom of the shaft, the long axis being either N–S or E–W. In the two tombs with rectangular shafts, the chamber was either L-shaped, oriented N–S or rectangular oriented E–W. The entrances to the burial chambers were sealed with stone slabs and in two cases dried mud brick. Body orientation was determined by the orientation of the burial space. At Hagar el-Beida 2 the dead were laid to rest in flexed position, hands raised to the

face. In chambers with the long axis oriented E–W, the heads pointed east with the face to the south, in chambers oriented N–S, the heads were to the north and facing east.

Grave inventories comprised different categories of artifacts. Foremost was the pottery, mostly handmade, mainly bowls, big and small. Most of these vessels featured a geometric ornament in the upper part, engraved, impressed or in relief. Large jars, also commonly decorated with geometric patterns on the shoulders, were less numerous. Beakers constituted a small group; they were characterized



*Fig. 1. General view of the Hagar el-Beida 2 site prior to the excavations  
(Photo A. Longa)*

by geometric decoration all over. Three examples of wheel-made vessels comprised a bowl and beaker covered with red slip and a small bowl painted and decorated with stamped impressions.

Weapons were well represented among the grave goods. Most graves produced small iron points, one-, two- or four-barbed. The finds included a few stone archer's rings and one spearhead of iron. In the eastern group of tumuli, 15 out of 17 graves turned out to belong to males and contained weapons in the grave inventory. In the northern group, only one grave represented this category. Of the other six explored tumuli, two were of children

under two years, three were of adolescents of indeterminate sex and the last one did not contain any grave goods.

Warriors' graves were thus clearly in prevalence in the excavated part of the site. A shared feature of all the burials was the variety of personal adornments, observed especially in the male burials. The combination of ornaments and weapons is common on cemeteries of Meroitic as well as post-Meroitic age (El-Tayeb 2003: 130–139).

The assemblage of personal ornaments from the HB2 site comprised mostly beads, three finger rings, one armband and a zoomorphic amulet.

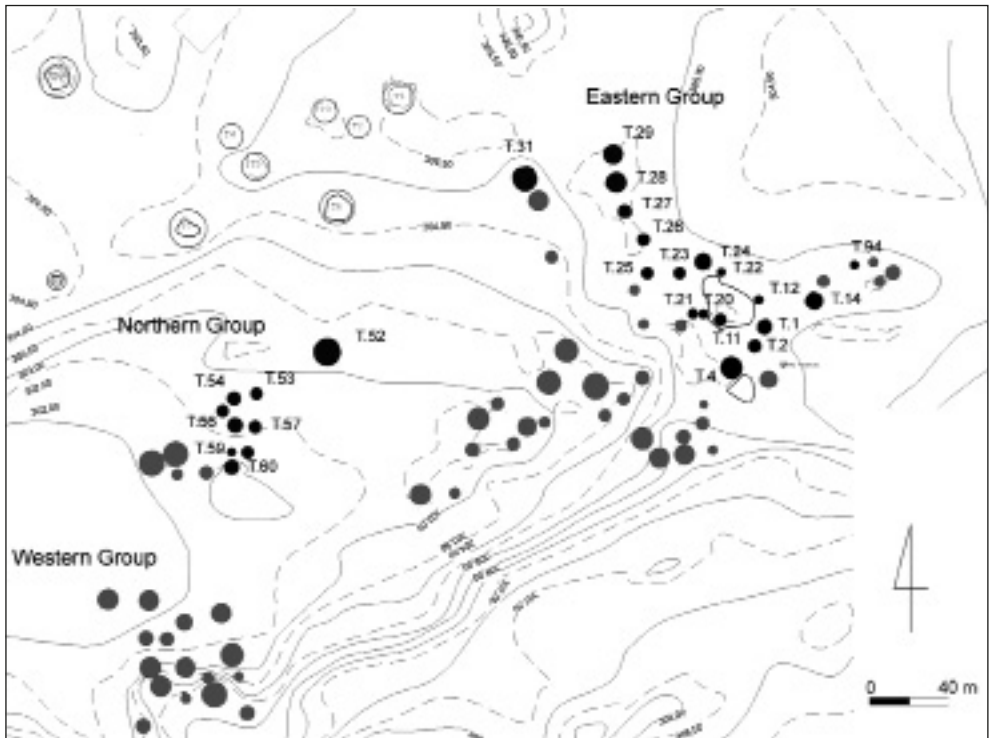


Fig. 2. Hagar el-Beida 2 site plan  
(Plan M. Sip)

## BEADS

Beads were found in 21 out of 24 burials. They were made mostly of ostrich eggshell, faience, stone and glass. Ten principal shapes were distinguished: discoid, cylindrical, barrel-shaped, oblate, drop-shaped, biconical, fusiform, spherical, multi-faceted and floral.

**Discoid.** Simple oval discs, pierced in the middle. At Hagar el-Beida 2 these were made of ostrich eggshell. Three variants were recorded: small with a diameter of approximately 0.4–0.5 cm, medium with 0.7–1.0 cm diameter and large measuring 1.3 cm in diameter [Fig. 4:1].

**Cylindrical.** Simple cylinders, pierced down the long axis, from 0.5 to 1.5 cm long with a diameter of about 0.5 cm on the average. Made mainly of faience. Two length variants were distinguished for this material: long beads, 0.5–1.5 cm, and short ones, 0.3 to 0.5 cm, the diameter being about 0.6 cm. Cylindrical beads were made also of stone and glass [Fig. 4:2].

**Barrel-shaped.** Oval-sectioned beads with convex profile and flat bases, from 1.0 to 1.5 cm high and a maximum diameter of about 1.2 cm. The specimens from HB2 were made of stone and glass [Fig. 4:3].

**Oblate.** Beads characterized by an oval section across and elongated ellipse lengthwise, usually from 0.3 to 0.5 cm in length and from 0.5 to 0.7 cm in diameter. Made of stone and glass [Fig. 4:4].

**Drop-shaped.** Shaped like teardrops in long section, these beads were pierced in the narrowed part. Two variants were distinguished in the assemblage: large beads approximately 1.5 cm long and with a maximum diameter of 1.2 cm and small ones 0.6–0.8 cm long and about 0.6–0.7 cm in diameter. Made of stone [Fig. 4:5].

**Biconical.** Elongated forms with two points and concave sides, maximum diameter at mid-length, pierced through one of the pointed ends. Approximately 2 cm long, maximum diameter from 1.0 to 1.2 cm. Specimens from HB2 were made of stone [Fig. 4:8].

**Fusiform.** Oval-shaped with flat bases and elongated long section, 0.3–0.4 cm long and 0.5 cm in diameter. Made of glass [Fig. 4:6].

**Spherical.** Beads of a diameter ranging from 0.3 to 1.0 cm. Made of glass [Fig. 4:7].

**Multi-faceted.** Rectangular sections crosswise and lengthwise, polished sides, 0.7–0.8 cm long, 0.5–0.6 cm wide. Made of glass [Fig. 4:9].

**Floral.** Oval form with ellipsoidal cross-section, edges grooved vertically, 0.5 cm long and 0.7 cm in diameter. The one specimen of this kind from HB2 was made of stone [Fig. 3].

Beads made of ostrich eggshells were the most common kind, found in virtually all the graves at Hagar el-Beida 2. The discoid form of these beads is typical and they have been found in archaeological assemblages in Nubia from the Neolithic. Three variants of the bead have been recorded at HB2. All three were represented in grave T.31, which was also the only assemblage to produce these beads in the large variant [e.g. Fig. 4:1]. Interesting examples originated from burials T.25 and T.54. The latter burial was of a young person. The body was laid out on the left side, aligned N–S, head to the north and facing west, hands raised to the face. Bracelets of small beads were found on the wrists and a string of medium-sized beads was wrapped twice around the hips. Another string of beads made of

small beads alternating with medium-sized examples lay by the feet of the deceased. Medium-sized beads occurred in the pelvic area, attached to pieces of leather which may have been part of the apparel, if not a bag accessory. The necklace comprised ostrich eggshell beads alternating with beads made of faience and stone in blue and green colors and a pendant in the form of a cowry shell. Altogether, 1600 beads were recorded in this burial. A string of ostrich eggshell beads wrapped around the hips was also observed in burial T.25. In this case, the necklace was made up of a string of faience beads interspersed with stone ones.

Stone beads occurred in a number of forms, the stone being mainly quartz and carnelian. Cylindrical beads constituted the simplest form, but barrel-shaped, drop-shaped and oblate beads were also in evidence.

In a number of graves the stone beads were singular, constituting in all likelihood a central decorative point of strings of faience beads. In spite of having been plundered, grave T.24 presents a good example: singular examples of cylindrical, barrel-shaped and oblate beads, as well

as faience and glass beads, were found with a few remains of the original grave furnishings, such as iron knife or point and stone archer's ring.

Drop-shaped beads of quartz rock came from two graves. The threading holes crosswise through the upper part leave no doubt that they were meant as key elements of strings of beads made of other materials. The necklace from grave T.25 confirmed this manner of threading with individual glass and stone beads interspersed with mostly faience beads [see *Fig. 4:5a*]. Large white drop-shaped beads, found on the chest of the deceased, must have constituted the central decorative element. Beads of the same shape but smaller size and red color were plentiful in grave T.52 [see *Fig. 4:5b*].

Faience beads from the HB2 site occur in green and blue variants and represent a typical cylindrical form. The sequence of beads recorded during the exploration of grave T.52 permitted a reconstruction of threading pattern with discoid ostrich eggshell beads separating the faience specimens [*Fig. 4:2b*]. Unfortunately, the tomb had been plundered and the original position of the string of beads was impossible to determine. The same threading pattern was noted from grave T.54.

Small cylindrical beads occurred next to the elongated examples, as do oblate beads, e.g. the beads from grave T.52 which must have formed a string, even though they were found scattered throughout the grave [*Fig. 3*, right side]. It is a point of interest that not all of the beads were cut; whether this form was intended or reflects careless execution of a cheap mass-produced ornament is a question for discussion.

Glass beads are less numerous, even as they come in a variety of forms: cylindrical, barrel-shaped, oblate, fusiform and



*Fig. 3. Floral bead in the center (T.25)  
(Photo E. Gauza)*



Fig. 4. (centerfold) Types of beads from Hagar el-Beida 2: 1a,b – discoid (a – T.31; b – T.52), 2a,b – cylindrical (a – T.11; b – T.52), 3 – barrel-shaped (T.21), 4 – oblate (T.60), 5a,b – drop-shaped (a – T.25, together with faience beads; b – T.52), 6 – fusiform (T.60), 7 – spherical (T.60), 8 – biconical (T.52), 9 – multi-faceted (T.52); in photo on right, complete set of beads from the burial in T.52 (Photos E. Gauza)







multifaceted. Grave T.56, which is the burial of a juvenile, produced spherical white and deep blue beads; the beads were scattered because of the plundering, hence it is impossible to say whether they formed one or more strings. Here, too, uncut segmented beads were present.

Multifaceted polished glass beads constituted the most interesting form of ornament from the site. Only four examples were found, all from grave T.52 [Fig. 4:9]. Beads of this type must have been prized possessions considering the laborious process of their execution.

## BIRD AMULET

The bird amulet found in T.12 clearly represented a falcon [Fig. 5]. Other finds from this grave, which was plundered, but still preserved some of the original equipment, included one- and four-barbed points of iron, decorated pottery and beads of ostrich eggshell, faience and stone. The amulet was most certainly a central decorative element in a string of beads. It was made of animal bone and is no more than a centimeter high. Despite the small size, the representation was rendered with much attention to detail.

Fig. 5. Falcon-shaped amulet (T.12)  
(Photo L. Gauza)



## RINGS AND ARMBAND

Rings were also present among the personal accessories found in the graves on the HB2 site. A plundered child's grave (T.59) produced an example of iron wire, wound spirally, the form permitting size adjustment. The diameter of the ring was 1.2 cm. Other personal ornaments from the burial consisted of beads made of ostrich eggshell and glass, the latter in a variety of colors: white, blue, orange and red. Textile fragments from the grave were identified as coming from either clothing or a burial shroud.



Fig. 6. Copper band, surface find  
(Photo A. Longa)

A decorated copper band [Fig. 6] was found on the ground surface, in the context of a recently plundered grave (T.16). The copper-sheet band was 1 cm wide and 6.5 cm long. The surface was divided into a center band of ornament sandwiched between outer borders which were engraved with diagonal cross-hatching. The center pattern comprised irregularly disposed vertical lines, diagonal lines and triangles.

The third example of a ring was found in grave T.25. It was a simple band of silver and was found on the middle finger of the skeleton. The diameter was 1.7 cm.

An armband of sorts was also discovered among the artifacts from Grave T.4. It comprised leather thongs and two rings, one of copper and one of iron, 1.3 cm and 1.6 cm in diameter respectively. The significance of this object may have been functional or symbolic.

## RECAPITULATION

Grave plundering constituted a serious problem at the HB2 site. Ancient robbery shafts could be traced on the surface of the mounds and in cross-sections, and heaps dumped by robbers surrounded the graves. The pits, shafts and burial chambers produced potsherds used by the robbers as spades for digging. Modern robbers penetrated the central part of the mound to reach the burial chamber. In effect, the original position of artifacts cannot be determined in most cases.

The abundance of personal ornaments in the excavated graves demonstrates the importance of these objects for their owners. Good preservation of organic matter indicates that beads were threaded on strings made of organic material. Different threading patterns could be reconstructed, mixing together different kinds of beads. Combinations of different color materials had unquestionable aesthetic value. Equally interesting effects were produced by combinations of different bead shapes. Excavations produced evidence of strings of beads, either singular or wrapped several times around, being used as necklaces. Beads also appeared as

bracelets, but in this case the string was composed of just one kind of bead. Strings of beads could also be wrapped around the hips; in this case the beads were of ostrich eggshell exclusively. Finally, beads could also be attached to pieces of clothing.

With regard to rings, in one case it was clear how the ring had been worn. Different materials were used to produce rings.

The issue of production and distribution of personal ornaments constitutes an interesting research problem, especially when the raw material was not easily accessible or required special manufacturing tools and skills. Ornaments made of organic and ceramic raw materials were mass-made presumably, filling the needs of the local populace. Luxury items, made of stone, metal or glass, would have been produced in specialist workshops.

The assemblage presented here came from just two seasons of excavations. Further explorations may contribute more data on the evolution of tastes with regard to items of personal adornment as well as ways of wearing them. Examination of the grave goods inventory from comparable sites in the Fourth Cataract region, where

work has been completed as part of the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project (MDASP), should provide

many valuable insights into the role and importance of jewelry for the local population.

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