

1 Introduction

1.1 Prologue

The ancient site of Hamadab, occupied from the 3rd century B.C. to the 4th century A.D., is one of the few well-researched Meroitic habitation sites in the Middle Nile Valley. Set within a rich cultural landscape, Hamadab was a well-planned urban settlement and neighbour to Meroe, the capital of the African kingdom of Kush.

Excavations within the town of Hamadab have yielded large quantities of stratified ceramics which form an important body of data to study the living conditions and day-to-day activities of the wider population. Structural and material remains indicate that the walled Upper Town was populated by middle-class craftspeople and their families who engaged in localised production, fabricating and utilising typical Meroitic objects to fulfil their everyday needs.

Production wasters from a pottery kiln and floor assemblages from domestic households are systematically investigated to reconstruct patterns of ceramic production and everyday use within the community. The assemblage is representative of Meroitic material culture in the heartland and thus contributes to a better understanding of the way of life in ancient Kush.

1.2 Cultural Background

The Kingdom of Kush, an African civilisation of the Early Iron Age, controlled much of the Middle Nile Valley and the adjacent savannah landscapes from ca. 1000 B.C. to A.D. 350. This indigenous cultural complex developed along the river banks from Lower Nubia to the area of the Sixth Cataract. After Egypt had withdrawn its dominion over the region at the end of the 2nd millennium B.C., Kush became a politically centralised kingdom that maintained its sovereignty throughout the 1st millennium B.C. until the 4th century A.D. It was neighbour to Late Period Egypt, and from the 1st century B.C., to the Roman Empire in the north as well as to the rising Axumite state in the east.

The close contact with powerful Egypt entailed the use of stone architecture, relief art and writing, through which archaeologists of the past hundred years have explored the history of Kush. As a consequence, the archaeology of the Middle Nile Valley has traditionally been

studied from an Egyptocentric perspective, dominated by investigations on elite cultural markers such as monuments, rituals, prestige goods or the adoption of foreign lifestyles (e.g. Hofmann 1991; Morkot 2000; O'Connor 1993; Reisner 1923c; Török 1989). Studies on this strong Egyptian connection also tended to neglect important aspects of Kush's indigenous cultural achievements.

Moreover, as Kush reveals typical features of a 'Sudanic State' in its economy and power structure, it differs very much from Pharaonic Egypt (Edwards 1996b; Edwards 1999c; Fuller 2003). D. N. Edwards has pointed out that »A recognition of such differences is essential for beginning to understand the cultural history of Meroe, the variety of Meroitic material culture and how it was used« (Edwards 2004, 164). Although a greater appreciation of Meroe's place within Africa is beginning to develop (Brass 2015; Edwards 1998, 175 f.; Edwards 2003; Edwards 2004, 164; Fuller 2003), still very little is understood about its wider population, their way of life and the handling of everyday items.

Invaluable sources of information for the study of ancient African societies are ceramic containers, which were widely used in the daily routine of everybody's life. These durable items constitute the most abundant artefact class of material culture and can thus be studied in many different ways. They provide insights into the potters' skills and manufacturing techniques, the cultural identity of their makers and users, contemporary fashions, exchange networks and chronological developments.

In order to contribute to a better understanding of the living conditions and social realities in this African kingdom, the ceramic finds from a non-elite settlement in the Meroitic heartland are investigated. The primary objective is to examine the lifeways and routines of Kush's wider population.

1.3 Research Area

Within the long stretch of the Middle Nile, the region around Meroe constitutes an important archaeological area (Fig. 1). In contrast to the narrow fertile river banks in the northern parts of Nubia, Meroitic occupation in the southern regions was extensive along the Nile and stretched several dozens of kilometres into the hinter-

land, known as the western Butana (Baud 2010a, 213–224; P. Wolf 2019). This area received annual rains from the summer monsoon and was fed by wadi¹ drainage systems, which sustained a rich savannah environment with African flora and fauna. It yielded abundant resources for diverse subsistence strategies, craft productions and trade, which contributed to the prosperity of this southern province, also known as the Meroitic heartland (Edwards 1999c; Edwards 2004, 165–167; Fuller 2015, 44).

The capital Meroe was the residence of the royal family and one of the continuously occupied towns in the kingdom (Shinnie – Anderson 2004; Shinnie – Bradley 1980). Around it developed a densely populated landscape with urban settlements, temples, production areas and cemeteries, predominantly clustered along the eastern bank of the Nile and the major wadi systems (Baud 2008, 61 f.; P. Wolf 2015).

One of these urban settlements was ancient Hamadab, a five-hectare town occupied between the 3rd century B.C. and the 4th century A.D. (Fig. 2). The archaeological site was made known in 1914 by the British archaeologist J. Garstang (Garstang et al. 1914–1916, 14–17; Török 1997, 232–234; P. Wolf 2002a), who discovered a temple and a historically important inscription mentioning Meroe's conflict with Rome around 25–20 B.C. (Rilly 2017, 246–252; P. Wolf – Rilly 2010).

Hamadab, lying in close proximity to Meroe, was inseparably linked to the dynamics and fortunes of the kingdom. While the origins of the site go back to the 3rd century B.C., it experienced a boom during the Classic Meroitic period, the heyday of the kingdom, and was thereafter gradually transformed into an irregular settlement (Nowotnick et al. 2017; P. Wolf 2019, 736–738). When the political power of the Meroitic state collapsed in the 4th century A.D., the town of Hamadab was still existing but already largely abandoned, suffering the same fate as other urban settlements in this region did (Baud 2010a, 213; Edwards 2004, 181–184; P. Wolf 2019, 755 f.). Later materials of post-Meroitic to Islamic date have been found scattered on the surface. With its good state of preservation and easy access to underlying archaeological remains, the site of Hamadab is to date the best-studied example of a habitation in the greater Meroe region and thus serves as an ideal base for studies on the living conditions of a past African community.

1.4 Research Period

A unified periodisation for Sudan's historical past is still a pending issue. Dates and designations of historical periods remain imprecise and are still being debated (Rilly 2017, 120–122; Török 2015). In this study, the term ›Kushite‹ is used when referring to the entire cultural complex from Egypt's withdrawal around 1070 B.C. until the collapse of the Kushite state in the 4th century A.D.

Period		Approximate Date Range
Napatan	Early	9th to mid-7th cent. B.C.
	Middle	Mid-7th to 6th cent. B.C.
	Late	5th to 4th cent. B.C.
Meroitic	Early	3rd to 2nd cent. B.C.
	Classic	1st cent. B.C. to end of 1st cent. A.D.
	Late	2nd to mid-4th cent. A.D.

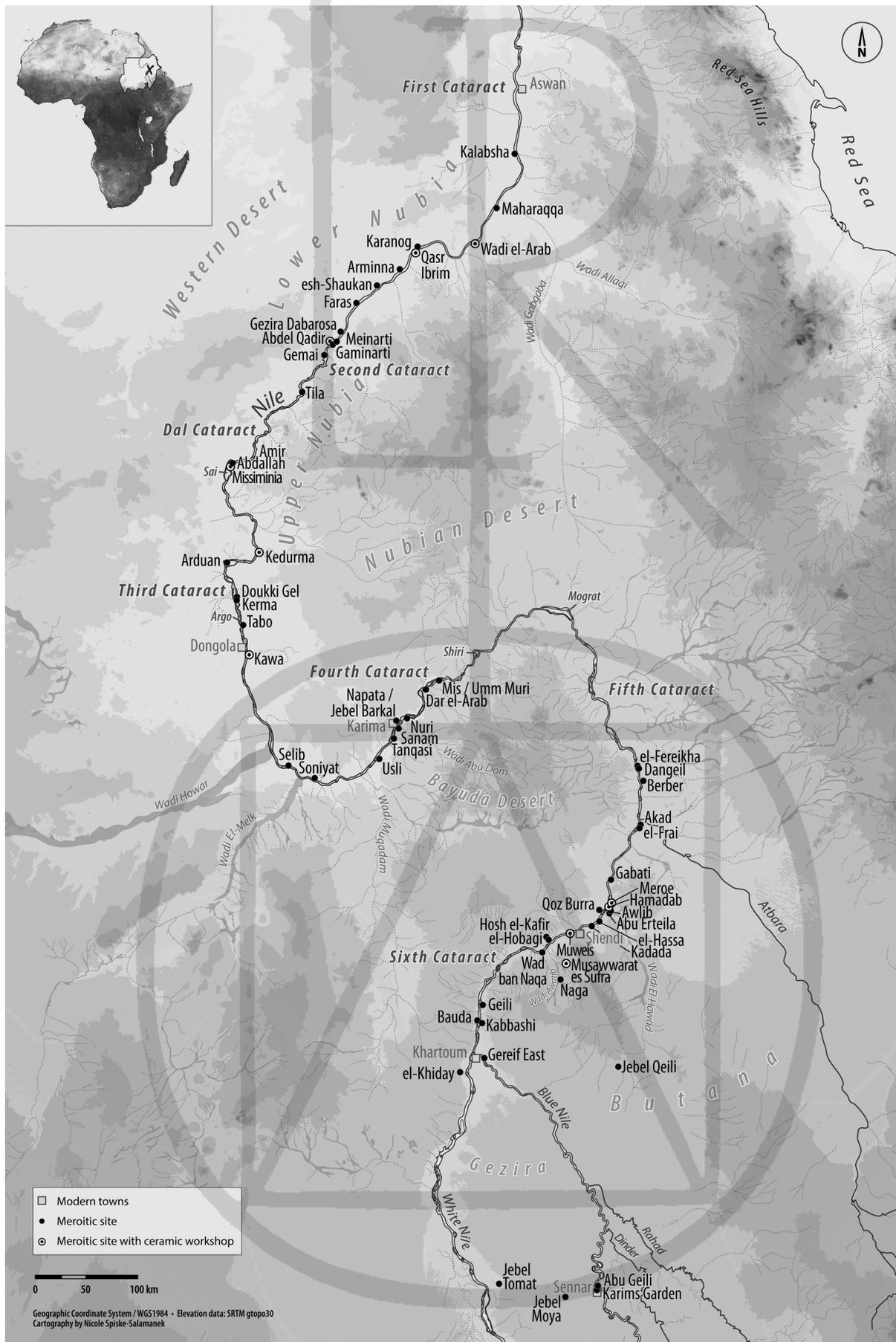
Table 1 Periodisation of Kushite history as used in the present study

The Napatan and Meroitic phases constitute the two main periods in the history of Kush (Edwards 2004, 112; Priese 1978; Török 2015, 13–20). Though parts of a common cultural unit, both periods produced distinct repertoires in ceramics, architectural styles, burial customs and other forms of material culture that justify this division. Table 1 specifies the chronological phases and approximate dates used in this study.

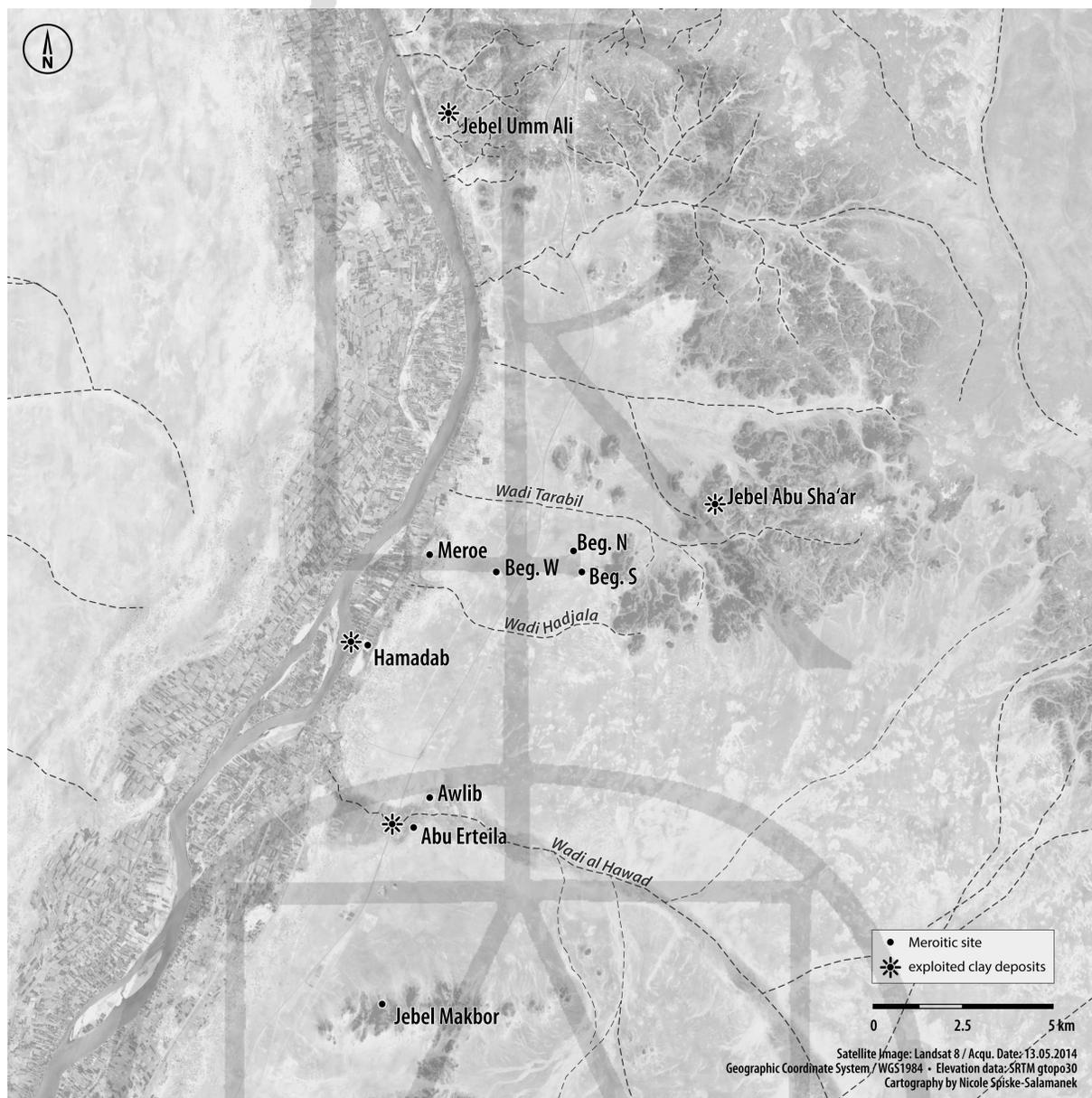
For the Napatan period, a threefold division into an Early, Middle and Late Napatan phase will be adopted, beginning with proto-Kushite times and the 25th-Dynasty rulers as the first part of this period (cf. Lohwasser 2012, 19; Welsby Sjöström – Thomas 2011) and the following kings from Atlanersa approximately to Aramatelqo as the yet ill-defined Middle Napatan phase. By the Late Napatan phase (ca. 5th century B.C.), the city of Meroe was the chosen seat for the royal family and experienced a considerable building boom (Hinkel – Sievertsen 2002, 37–40). The beginning of the Meroitic period is conventionally tied to the transfer of the royal pyramid cemetery from the region of Napata to Begrawiya near Meroe around 270 B.C. (Rilly 2017, 191–195; Török 2015, 19).

The Meroitic period, in turn, is divided into an Early, Classic and Late phase, though their boundaries remain

¹ ›Wadi‹ is the Arabic term for a valley or dry riverbed. For the sake of simplicity the English plural ›wadis‹ is used.



1 Map of the Middle Nile Valley with relevant archaeological sites of the Meroitic period



2 Map of the Meroe region, indicating the location of Meroe City, Hamadab and the surrounding archaeological sites and landmarks

poorly defined. The Early Meroitic period traditionally covers the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C., but appears to end in turbulent times, leaving the beginning of the Classic Meroitic phase in the dark. The regencies of Meroe's most famous sovereigns Amanirenas, Amanishakheto, Amanitore and Natakamani and the following princes up to Amanakhareqerem are commonly referred to as rulers of the Classic Meroitic period, i.e. 1st century B.C. and 1st century A.D. The transition to the subsequent Late Meroitic period is difficult to be tied to individual rulers but the last phase of the Kushite period is commonly placed in the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. The kingdom continued to exist into the first half of the 4th century A.D., with its last two kings having ruled around

A.D. 350 (Rilly 2017, 318–325; Török 2015, 97). The material remains mark the gradual transition to a new cultural era, the so-called post-Meroitic period, a historically little-known phase between the second half of 4th and the 6th century A.D. Following a long period of thriving Christian kingdoms, the Middle Nile Valley came under the growing influence of Muslim rule in the 16th century.

The subdivisions of Kushite history, being artificial constructs, can only sporadically be associated with historical events. As transformations in the material culture happen at a slower pace, distinct evolutions in the ceramic typology and technology can usually not be precisely paralleled with political or historical phases. Thus, the chronological framework for Kush presented

here shall provide a useful outline for scientific communication but cannot serve to draw historical implications from it or to narrow down absolute dates for individual ceramic objects.

1.5 Previous Research on Domestic Ceramics of the Meroe Region

The poorly understood character of domestic ceramics is a major research problem for the archaeology of the Kushite period. Amongst several external factors, it is the very complex nature of its ceramic assemblages that has led to this deficiency. Kushite pottery is a highly varied archaeological category that poses many challenges to its study. Over a period of more than a thousand years, Kushite potters employed a diversity of materials and methods to shape ceramic wares for various purposes. Exquisite fine wares and coarse utility products, poorly executed forms and artistic masterpieces can be found side by side. One part of Kushite ceramics was the outcome of a standardised mass production, while the other was made by following long-lived potting techniques that have been maintained in north-east Africa over several millennia. To this versatility we can add chronological changes, repeated external influences and regional varieties along the length of the Middle Nile Valley. These factors – not to mention a multitude of technological choices and stylistic or functional characteristics – have impeded the work for a basic compendium of this material, its functional specifics and chronological development. The lack of long-term investigations as well as a low regard for ceramic studies further contributed to the fact that no comprehensive type series of Kushite ceramics have been established to date. A recent outline on Meroitic ceramics (David 2019) includes pottery wares from Nubia and the heartland in a broad chronological overview. However, some of the ceramic developments described for the southern regions could not be verified on the basis of the studied assemblage.

Well-preserved funerary inventories from richly equipped tombs in Lower Nubia have provided the basis for some major pottery classifications (Griffith 1924; Holthoer 1977; Williams 1991). To the present day, Nubia's rich heritage has brought forth material studies on funerary vessels (David 2012) or ceramics from Pharaonic temple sites (Ruffieux 2018). However, W. Y. Adams seminal work on the »Ceramic industries of medieval Nubia«, which also includes Meroitic pottery, constitutes the only substantial evaluation of ceramic wares based on settlement excavations in Nubia (Adams 1986).

Despite being based on ceramic wares and families rather than formal types, his classification still serves as the substantial basis for most studies on historical ceramics of the Middle Nile Valley. While these northern ceramic typologies have some relevance concerning the technology and general developments in the Meroitic ceramic industry, their main value lies at the regional level as they are not directly transferable to living assemblages produced and used in the Meroitic heartland, more than 700 km further south.

For the Meroe region and specifically for domestic pottery, no standard reference work is yet published and comparative data have been made available only in a very selective manner. A compilation of thirteen plates with ceramic types from the elite pyramid cemetery at Begrawiya West still provides the most useful overview of complete vessel forms in the heartland (Dunham 1963, 337–349 figs. A–M). The seriation of its recurring types represents the sole analytical evaluation of this material, offering an outline of how these forms developed during the Classic to Late Meroitic periods (Edwards 1999a). A similar approach has been applied for the ceramic containers from the elite cemetery of Berber (Bashir – David 2015).

In the early 20th century, archaeological exploration in the Meroitic south in fact began with large-scale investigations at habitation sites. Touching upon a historically unknown territory, the excavations at Meroe City between 1909 and 1914 (Garstang et al. 1911) or Abu Geili on the Blue Nile in 1914 (Crawford – Addison 1951) produced copious amounts of ceramics. These, however, regarded mainly complete or decorated vessels in short catalogues. Due to the two World Wars and the subsequent focus on the UNESCO rescue campaign in Lower Nubia, settlement studies in the Meroitic heartland remained underdeveloped until P. L. Shinnie approached Meroe once again from 1964 to 1985 (Shinnie – Anderson 2004; Shinnie – Bradley 1980). Large-scale excavations at this important site failed to produce correspondingly broad informative results from the ceramics found there. Stratigraphic trenches in Meroe's habitation quarters yielded a domestic corpus that covered a considerable chronological range (Robertson – Hill 2004; Shinnie – Bradley 1980, 97–162; Török 1997). But its ceramics were presented only in abbreviated formal types and ware groups, while their archaeological association to respective find spots or chronological levels is difficult to establish from the published reports. A broader evaluation towards chronological changes and significant developments in the pottery repertoire has been only briefly summarised (Bradley 1984).

Archaeological focus in the Meroe region then shifted towards palaces and temple sites and their respective

ceramic finds (Otto 1967; Otto 1973; Vercoutter 1962) or to those from salvage operations (Geus 1982; Geus – Lenoble 1985; Rose 1998). Other scholars elaborated on art historical issues of Meroitic table wares, discussing decoration styles, origin and foreign influences in greater detail (Elhassan 2004; Hofmann 1991; Hofmann 1994; Hofmann 1999; Török 1987; Török 1989; Török 1994; Török 2011; Wenig 1979; Zach 1988; Zach 1989).

Since the late 1990s, considerable advances in settlement excavations have been made across the study area. An important range of comparative ceramics is now available with the publications of stratified finds from several habitations in the Meroe region, such as Awlib (Daszkiewicz et al. 2005; El-Tayeb – Kołosowska 2005, 148–157), Abu Erteila (Daszkiewicz – Malykh 2017; Fantusati et al. 2012, 35–45; Fantusati et al. 2014, 750–755; Malykh 2017a; Malykh 2018), el-Hassa (Evina – David 2011), Hamadab (Dittrich 2003; Dittrich 2010; P. Wolf et al. 2014b, 730–733; P. Wolf et al. 2015a, 130–132; S. Wolf et al. 2009, 253–257; S. Wolf et al. 2011, 237–242), Meroe City (Grzymiski 2003, 55–75; Nowotnick 2016; Nowotnick 2018; S. Wolf et al. 2009, 253–257; S. Wolf et al. 2011, 237–242), Muweis (David – Evina 2016; Evina 2018), Musawwarat (Daszkiewicz – Wetendorf 2014; Daszkiewicz et al. 2016; Edwards 1999b; Näser – Daszkiewicz 2013; Näser – Wetendorf 2014; Näser – Wetendorf 2015; Seiler 1999), Wad ban Naqa (John 2013; Onderka et al. 2016, 106) and Naga (Wildung et al. 2011, 100–107).

However, most of these are short site reports or preliminary publications of selected pieces, whereas in-depth studies or complete assessments of a full corpus are very rare (Grzymiski 2003; Seiler 1999). With a growing awareness of this insufficiency, the last decade has witnessed a tendency towards more analytical or research-focussed ceramic studies, for example on manufacturing techniques (Daszkiewicz et al. 2016; David – Evina 2015; David – Evina 2016; Evina 2010), on economic aspects of the potting craft (David 2018; Ting – Humphris 2017) or on ceramic use (Thomas 2008; Thomas 2014). Nonetheless, domestic ceramics from habitations still remain poorly researched within Meroitic archaeology and have

not yet been exploited towards the great potential they inherit.

1.6 Research Objectives

In order to overcome some of these research gaps, the ceramic finds from Meroitic Hamadab are approached as everyday objects of an urban community. The focus is less on pottery typologies or decoration styles as art-historical expressions and more on the variety of actions and decisions that took place inside this town. Particularly the well-contextualised ceramics from sealed contexts are analysed towards the economic and domestic activities of the Meroitic residents, their daily routines and the general living conditions in Meroitic times. The primary aim is to evaluate, for the first time, aspects of production and use of an urban ceramic assemblage and how it relates to Meroitic daily life.

Relevant ceramic finds are used to approach some of the pending questions on the character of a Meroitic living assemblage; for example:

- Which traditions in pottery making were followed at Hamadab and what are the underlying choices behind different manufacturing modes?
- Under what circumstances and for which markets did Meroitic potters produce their wares? How was the ceramic production organised in the economic system of the town and of the state?
- What was a typical use assemblage in a Meroitic habitation quarter and how were various ceramic containers employed in the domestic sphere?
- Who lived in this densely crowded urban setting? Was Hamadab an 'ordinary' town with a typical diversity of occupants or did it have a special status in the settlement pattern of Meroitic Kush, such as a workers' estate, a military camp or a temple town? What were the daily concerns of its inhabitants, their socio-economic status, cultural affiliation and inter-regional contacts?