Seventy-eight years ago, in October 1931, two archaeologists, Walter Emery and Lawrence P. Kirwan, began an expedition up the Nile, travelling from Egypt into the Sudan. Just over a week later, they were surprised by the sight of a series of tumuli scattered across both banks of the river, of which they were previously unaware. After inquiring from the local people about the mounds’ origin, they were told that the tumuli at Qustul were the remains of the mounds of Goha, a legendary figure who had collected vast quantities of grain that were turned into earth by an evil spirit. Hearing that some of the mounds had been plundered, Emery and Kirwan began their excavations on the east bank of the Nile. By November 23, they had discovered the well-preserved bones of sacrificial horses, covered in silver trappings. Their subsequent excavations, which ended in 1934, revealed the rich and varied remains of the
royal tombs at Qustul and Ballana, a find that fundamentally altered our understanding of the archaeological landscape of Lower Nubia (Emery and Kirwan 1938a, 1–3).

Seventy years after the first publication of the finds from the royal tombs at Qustul and Ballana, what value is there in returning to the material from those cemeteries? Other excavations have been completed (Farid 1963; Williams 1991c), the sites now lie under the waters of Lake Nasser, and the material has found a new home and a new audience at the Nubian Museum in Aswan. The broad chronological scheme for the cemeteries is generally accepted (Török 1987a), the pottery has been analysed and seriated (Török 1987a; Rose 1992), and the importance of the cemeteries as a vital reference point in the archaeological framework of Lower Nubia in the post-Meroitic period remains unchallenged.

There is, however, yet more to be said about the sites and their remains, which begins with a debate that has framed the discipline of Nubiology from the start. When Emery and Kirwan found the remains at Qustul and Ballana, they rightly surmised that they belonged to the historical period following the fall of Meroë, but prior to the official adoption of Christianity in Nubia in the mid-sixth century AD. As a consequence of both this chronological hook and the nature of the archaeological remains that they uncovered, Emery and Kirwan suggested that the remains at the site must have been created by either the Blemmyes or Nobadae “race”, ultimately preferring the interpretation that it was the Blemmyes who had created the cemeteries (Emery and Kirwan 1938a, 18). This question of the identity of the people buried at Qustul and Ballana is a foundational aspect of my research as well. It is our approaches, and the theoretical frameworks from which we proceed, that differ.

It is certainly necessary to engage the classical sources upon which the Blemmyan/Nobadae designation is based—not to do so would be to ignore an important evidential source (see my discussion in chapter 1). I do not, however, consider that evidence to be as fundamental and valuable to an understanding of X-Group identity as the material culture that those individuals at the cemeteries chose, produced, used, and deposited.
Those remains are the best starting point from which to build an understanding of X-Group identity.

From a theoretical perspective (see especially chapter 3), the very question of the nature of identity—how it might be created, maintained, altered, and expressed—is a further guiding frame for this research. I do not intend, indeed do not wish, to finally settle a debate by identifying the individuals in the graves as either Blemmyes or Nobadae. As Adams has rightly argued (1965), such designation brings nothing to the debate, and a name will not advance our understanding of life and death at Qustul and Ballana. A name is not an identity (Dann forthcoming). Instead, we need to formulate an interpretation of identities as they were expressed via the material remains themselves. In dealing with this question at Qustul and Ballana, we are considering at least three interrelated forms of expression which revolve around the human, the animal, and the artefactual. Within this research, these three aspects are considered in a fundamentally imbricated manner, interacting with one another in the production of individual and group identities. Although this premise is important, it is the artefacts and their relationships with each other as a group, and their relationship with humans and with animals, that are central. As such, I argue that it is the very nature of those artefacts that is of consequence—their material, their colour, their manufacture, their decoration—all of these facets that inhere in the artefacts contribute to the expression of identities, especially a kind of aesthetic identity.

My ultimate aim, then, is to offer an interpretation of the X-Group-period royal cemeteries at Qustul and Ballana that is based on a quantitative analysis of the remains, and that integrates an explicitly theoretical approach. More specifically, the sites of Qustul and Ballana and the material from them can be evaluated in order to elucidate aspects of material culture and practice that were important in the creation and negotiation of X-Group identity. To do so, I aim to identify the aspects of material culture and related practices that characterised activities at Qustul and Ballana. The reasons for the move from Qustul to Ballana are little known. Consequently, the clarification of aspects of continuity or change between the cemeteries in material terms may be suggestive of
how sociopolitical arrangements were created, maintained, or changed. Such an interpretation is achieved by engagement with theoretical positions to inform the interpretation of the material culture, the sites themselves, and the people who used them. A comprehensive database of the artefactual and skeletal remains from Qustul and Ballana was created in order to facilitate a fine analysis of the Qustul and Ballana material. A small proportion of this data is presented here, but the reader is also referred to other publications (see Dann 2006, 2007, 2008).

THE EXCAVATIONS AT QUSTUL AND BALLANA

The first dam to be constructed in the region of the first Nile cataract was completed in 1902, in order to safeguard the productivity of the Egyptian cotton crop (Emery 1948). The building of this initial Aswan Dam as a means to regulate the Nile inundation led to the first systematic archaeological research expedition to Nubia. In 1907 the Egyptian government made the decision to raise the dam by a further seven meters, which led to the flooding of an area along the Nile from the First Cataract to the village of Derr, 250 kilometres to the south (Lyons 1910, 1). Consequently, in 1907 the Archaeological Survey of Nubia was instigated under the direction of George Reisner (and later Cecil M. Firth). The survey discovered and recorded numerous sites of different periods and cannot be overemphasized in its importance. The history of Nubia had previously been known only through the fragmentary works of certain classical authors and from its mention in Ancient Egyptian writings. The Archaeological Survey of Nubia, with archaeological exploration at its heart, aimed to investigate the ancient material culture of the region and the peoples who had produced it. The dam was heightened again between 1929 and 1934, with the effect that sites farther to the south of Wadi es-Sebua (the limit of the previous survey) were threatened. A further survey was mounted under the direction of Walter Emery and the subdirection of Lawrence Kirwan (Emery 1948, 2). The largest and most comprehensive expedition was mounted between 1959 and 1969, following the decision to construct the Aswan High Dam. With the aid
of UNESCO, a cooperative effort was launched involving many international teams who surveyed and excavated much of Lower Nubia along the Nile itself (Adams 1977, 4).

Although a number of travellers and archaeologists had noted the tumuli of Qustul and Ballana, they were not recognised as monuments of any archaeological importance until Emery and Kirwan’s journey to Lower Nubia in 1931. Consequently, their discovery came as a surprise, since Weigall’s account of the area, published in 1907, stated that “there are no ancient sites here” (142). Accompanying Emery and Kirwan were a number of Egyptian professionals from Cairo University, whilst 150 workmen from Guft (Quft), whose numbers eventually swelled to 400, were brought in as general labourers rather than supervisors. Emery held the opinion that “the Nubian is quite useless for work of this kind” (Emery 1948, 2). Alongside the expertise of the main excavators, Alfred Lucas advised on the identification of the small number of textile finds, Professor El-Batrawi analysed the human remains, Mohammed Husni Effendi was the surveyor, and Mohammed Hassenein Effendi was the clerk of works. In October 1931, the expedition arrived at the cemetery of Ballana, where they were then informed by the local people of a similar site at Qustul across the Nile on the east bank. The excavators entered tomb 3 at Qustul via a robber passage in order to make a preliminary investigation of what might be contained under the mounds (ibid.). Excavations at Qustul began in November, and on uncovering the remains of horses still dressed in their silver tack in the entrance ramp to tomb 3, the excavators began to realise “the true value of the discovery” (Emery and Kirwan 1938a, 2). The excavation of the two sites, even with a large team of workers, lasted a total of thirteen months between November 1931 and February 1934. The mounds were excavated by cutting large V-shaped sections through the tumuli, in order to remove the earth in successive slices, in a manner similar to the cutting of a cake. The gradual removal of the tumuli enabled the excavators to ascertain whether any objects had been buried in the fill of the mounds themselves. The removal of the earth was also necessary to enable the measurement and drawing of the substructures.
When the two sites were threatened by the planned raising of the Aswan High Dam and the expansion of Lake Nasser, an Egyptian team returned to Ballana in 1959 to excavate those tumuli that Emery and Kirwan had presumed to be plundered and that they had therefore left uninvestigated. These smaller tumuli and tombs did eventually prove to be widely plundered, but Shafik Farid’s excavation (1963) was important in revealing more information about the site, particularly in terms of tomb development. Farid’s site report gave no indication of the involvement of any other specialists, trained, for example, in the identification of animal remains.

Finally, a team from the Oriental Institute in Chicago (the Oriental Institute Nubian Expedition, hereafter OINE) returned to Qustul and Ballana in the 1970s to undertake widespread excavations of both sites, in an attempt to broaden the scale of previous archaeological activities. This expedition took place before the final flooding of both sites and was led by Professor Keith C. Seele. After his death, the excavations were written up and published by Dr Bruce Beyer Williams. A separate volume was also produced about the many textile finds from the sites (Mayer Thurman and Williams 1979). Seele’s approach differed from that of the previous excavators’, since he cleared broad surface areas at the sites rather than simply concentrating on the tumuli as more obvious indicators of archaeological activity. The OINE excavations have made it possible to understand the complex nature of the material at Qustul and Ballana as remains that relate to each other as part of a wider ritual space, incorporating different ritual activities beyond the construction of tombs.

Although the overall survival rate of much of the material from Qustul and Ballana was very high, the sites (Ballana, in particular) have suffered from water damage and some plundering. In some cases, percolating water had caused the roofs of the mud-brick substructures of certain tombs to cave in, or the mud brick had become a mass of mud that was melded together. The action of the water had a detrimental effect on the preservation rate of certain items, in particular, the organic materials that may have been present in the tombs. It would be expected that
the survival and state of the human remains were also affected by the damp conditions, but the excavators (Emery, Kirwan, and Farid) and the anatomist, El-Batrawi, make little mention of this. Although a number of the tombs had been robbed, a sizeable number also survived intact. These problems with the data must be borne in mind, but they do not preclude an analysis.

When the X-Group tombs of Qustul and Ballana were first excavated by Emery and Kirwan, the excavators planned the remains in situ so that the human and animal bodies would be sketched with any associated artefacts in place. In a number of cases, the skeletons were found still wearing certain items, such as crowns or sandals, and in other cases the wearing of jewellery was inferred by the nature of the remains: in the cases where, for example, beads were found amongst the clavicle, sternum, and vertebrae, it is considered likely that the individual was wearing a necklace. There were no substantial textile remains found in the “royal” tombs, but a large corpus survived in the graves excavated by the OINE (Mayer Thurman and Williams 1979). It is only through the careful and precise drawings and descriptions of the excavators that such information is known. From the archaeological remains, which demonstrate the close proximity of items of clothing (broadly defined) on or near the bodies, some of the people at Qustul and Ballana seem to have been buried fully clothed. It is due to this fortunate coincidence between the levels of preservation at the site, and the excavators’ foresight in recording all that they found, that one may attempt a detailed analysis and interpretation of the remains.

**Terminology**

It was Reisner who first introduced the term *X-Group* to denote the cultural group existing in Lower Nubia between the fall of the Meroitic state and the rise of the Christian kingdoms. Subsequently, much intellectual effort has been expended in trying to identify this cultural group by using fragmentary historical sources. It has become a common assumption that the people buried at Qustul and Ballana were
either Blemmyes or Nobadae. Trigger (1969a) has argued that the X-Group should be renamed the *Ballana culture* in order to emphasise its Lower Nubian origins. Adams (1965, 160) thought that the Blemmyes were likely to be the same as, or linked with, nomadic Beja tribes (cf. texts from Qasr Ibrim) who themselves could be identified as the Medjay of Pharaonic Egypt. A similar argument has been made on an etymological basis (Zaborski 1989). Säve-Söderbergh et al. thought that the rulers at Ballana may have been the Blemmyes (1981, 5). In contrast, Williams termed the X-Group at Qustul *Noba*, because of correspondences with historical sources naming the Nobadae, and argued that the X-Group should henceforth be termed the *Noubadian culture* (Williams 1991c, 3, 158). Edwards also called the Ballana tombs *Nobadian* (Edwards 2004, 206). Sadr suggested that the Red Noba took control of Nubia from the Dodecaschoinos to Dongola in the early centuries AD but did not displace Meroites already settled there (Sadr 1991, 124).

Caught up in this debate over terminology is the problem that certain authors use terms in a manner that collapses racial group identity with cultural identity. In fact, Emery demonstrated this point in the site report from the original excavations, in which he used the term *X-Group* to both identify material culture with the group of people at Qustul and Ballana, and also to mark a chronological period (1938a, 18–24).

The situation regarding the terminology and spelling of the various tribal names is, therefore, rather confusing and, at times, contradictory. Ultimately, however, Adams felt that the Blemmye/Nobadae debate was rather pointless, instead preferring a definition within which the X-Group peoples “are part of a complex transformation—racial, linguistic and cultural—which affected the whole of the Nile Valley from Aswân to the junction of the Niles” (Adams 1965, 161). The term *X-Group* will be used throughout this book, since the terms *Noubadian* and *Ballana culture* obscure the complexities involved in the attribution of ethnicities (see Rose 1992, 3, for a similar argument). The term *Ballana culture* is also not a suitable substitute, privileging as it does the site at Ballana.
WORKING WITH THE MATERIAL CULTURE

Much of the material presented in this book is the result of a far more detailed analysis, which is not possible to fully present here. This analysis was facilitated by the construction of a large and detailed database. The vast amount of data at the cemeteries was impossible to process and manipulate without the help of a computer programme. In constructing a database, or in entering data into a programme, the researcher must decide on the information that he or she will include in the study. The researcher must also classify the numerous pieces of data in a coherent and uniform manner in order for the computer programme to be able to run tests (or queries) to find patterns. In order to achieve this result, however, in order for the programme to work, the researcher imposes his or her own ideas about what is deemed to be valuable information. In actuality, these decisions at the beginning of the analytical process have a crucial bearing on the final results. Yet, researchers are rarely candid with regard to these distorting factors, and the use of apparently scientific methods gives an air of (false) objectivity to such studies.

This research, although aided by a database and necessitating the production of queries and graphs, was subjective from the outset. My main concern was to identify and document as many different aspects of the data from the sites as possible. The decision to do so was due to two related factors. Firstly, certain assumptions have often been repeated concerning the cultural practices of the X-Group, such as the characteristics of their pottery, the usual body positions that they deemed to be appropriate in death, the colours found in their material culture. I wanted to test the assumptions about each of these suppositions. Secondly, in attempting to test these assumptions, I had to suppose that other variables were possibly important in X-Group practices and material culture, and it was these that would be both interesting and significant to find. Following this course meant recording a very high number of small details about the artefacts, which other researchers with a different approach may have deemed unimportant. Bill Adams, in his two-volume work on Nubian ceramics, describes a similar process in the development of
his classificatory system for pottery finds. My approach to the material from Qustul and Ballana, similar to his approach to ceramics, has, at the outset, been one of “splitting”, rather than of “lumping” (Adams 1986b, 8, 90).

This most basic decision, to split rather than to lump, was also ultimately informed by two other framing concerns that I have already mentioned: an increasing interest in the aesthetic qualities of the remains at the cemeteries, and the possibility that the boundaries between humans, animals, and artefacts might not be as straightforwardly delineated as they are often considered to be. The recording of the detailed data in a relational manner within the database allowed these apparent boundaries to be traversed and collapsed when necessary.

This explanation presents a rather neat and linear picture of what was, in reality, a constantly changing idea about where significance might lie, and how to attempt to find it. Ideas, theoretical concepts, and a detailed understanding of the material culture evolved in tandem. My concern was always to be able to tie together what are so often erroneously constructed as two opposing entities: hard data versus abstract theory. Yet, behind this attempt was a basic concern for the fundamental differences in the material character of the remains—these were objects and bodies that mattered. (For more graphs, figures, and a detailed explanation of the construction of the database, see Dann 2006.)

**Scope of the Present Volume**

This research is based on the material from the excavations at Qustul and Ballana conducted by Emery and Kirwan, and then subsequently by Farid. The material from the OINE excavations is not the main focus of discussion in this research, and it was not used in any of the quantitative analyses that are discussed herein. There are a number of reasons for placing such a limitation on the parameters of this research. Firstly, the excavations conducted by Emery and Kirwan, and later by Farid, concentrated on the larger tumuli that are broadly designated as the *royal tumuli*. The OINE research was concerned with non-royal
The Royal X-Group Tombs at Qustul and Ballana

graves. Although the conceptual line that divides royal from non-royal could itself be open to discussion, it was more appropriate to focus this research on the royal tombs as a discrete group. As such, the research could then focus on intragroup cohesion or variation. Secondly, a very detailed level of recording and analysis was devised for the material from the tombs excavated by Emery, Kirwan, and Farid (the tombs that contained archaeological material), which constitutes a very significant amount of data. Thirdly, the Farid site report is very similar in its layout and content to the original Emery and Kirwan reports, whereas the OINE volume is recorded in a very different manner. Since the 1938 and 1963 site reports recorded the same types of information, they could be more legitimately interrogated as a coherent dataset. The royal tombs, whilst forming a significant body of data for Lower Nubia in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, have not yet been subject to a critical interpretation. This research attempts such a task.

Chapter 1 focuses on the historical and cultural background of Lower Nubia following the decline of Meroitic culture in the mid-fourth century AD (see table 1 for a chronological scheme). Both the written evidence of classical authors and the archaeological evidence from a variety of sites in Lower Nubia provide a contextual backdrop to the development of the cemeteries at Qustul and Ballana (see figure 1 for a map of the area and many of the sites mentioned in this text). The basis of the chronology of the Qustul and Ballana cemeteries is also outlined here.

<table>
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<th>Table 1. Chronology of Sudanese cultures.</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Culture</strong></td>
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<td>Kushite</td>
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<tr>
<td>X-Group</td>
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<td>Christian</td>
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*Source. After Welsby 2002.*
FIGURE 1. Map of the Sudan.

Chapter 2 is concerned with the ways in which archaeologists have approached and interpreted the remains of X-Group culture. Such a discussion places the changing interpretations of Nubiologists within the framework of the archaeological discipline. Building on this theme, the following chapter is concerned with the implications of other theoretical positions for a reading of the material from Qustul and Ballana. The way in which the remains can be approached, the types of questions that may be asked about them, and the potential for interpretation are explored, especially within the context of identities, embodiment, and aesthetics. Such considerations are crucial to building a reinterpretation of the sites.

Chapters 4 to 6 turn to the specificities of the material culture of Qustul and Ballana. Particular attention is paid to the materiality of artefacts and their processes of manufacture. We also make the important step of examining the colours, decoration methods, and decoration designs in the artefacts from the sites. This discussion of the material qualities of the artefacts from the royal tombs points towards how such qualities were constitutive of past experience. These facets are drawn together in the final chapter to advance an interpretation of life and death at the two sites, based on aspects of the material remains. As such, an interpretation of the nature of X-Group culture, as defined at Qustul and Ballana, can also be proposed.