Introduction

Nubia is a region in North-East Africa encompassing northern Sudan (the country) and the southern fringes of Egypt. It consists of two parts, the names of which—Lower Nubia in the north and Upper Nubia in the south—correspond to the flow of the Nile. Regions in Nubia are separated by the Nile cataracts, the First Cataract being located south of Aswan and the last one, the Sixth, north of modern-day Khartoum. After the fall of the Kingdom of Meroe, which probably extended as far south as the confluence of the Blue and White Niles and beyond, three entities emerged between the 4th and 6th centuries AD. These were Nobadia in Lower Nubia, Makuria in Upper Nubia, and Alwa (Alodia) in the region upriver from the Fifth Cataract. Single burials in tumuli as well as massive tombs, bronze horse harnesses, and wide-bladed iron spears appeared throughout Sudan. Cemeteries of Nubadian kings, queens and members of the elites were excavated in Qustul and Ballana (Emery and Kirwan 1938; Farid 1963). Royal burials have yet to be identified in the Early Makuria and Alwa regions. Recent finds of ornaments and adornments at El-Zuma have provided evidence of the elite character of at least some of the tombs at this site.

The El-Zuma site is situated between the Third and Fourth Cataracts in the Dongola Reach in Upper Nubia, a region that occupies a strategic position controlling the north–south and east–west desert roads, as well as riverine communication routes (Mahmoud El-Tayeb 2012, 15). The site has been dated to the late post-Meroitic period, otherwise known as Early Makuria Phase II (AD 450–550) (see Volume I, Chapter 1; Mahmoud El-Tayeb 2012, 61–75). The spread of Byzantine-style adornments, Christian symbols, and overseas imports would have followed trade routes of the time, and these goods were also clearly passing through the territory of still-pagan Early Makuria, a region that included El-Zuma.

Between 2004 and 2017 more than 2,000 items of personal adornment (beads, pendants, earrings, chains, and rings), elite jewellery (cabochons and settings), and other decorated objects (sheet metal, ivory intarsia, and gaming pieces) were excavated at El-Zuma from 23 of a total of 25 heavily robbed tumuli. Three categories of tumuli were identified at El-Zuma based on differences in their superstructures and substructures: type I, type II, and type III (see Volume I, Chapter 3). While type I tumuli were the biggest and had the most complex substructures (an underground tunnel of unknown function lead-

ing towards the main burial chamber being the most characteristic feature), tumuli of types II and III were usually smaller, did not contain tunnels, and had superstructures in the form of flat-topped mounds. The mound of type III tumuli was also surrounded by a stone ring on the ground surface and the substructure consisted of only a rectangular shaft and one burial chamber, usually cut into the western wall of the shaft. Tumuli 1, 3 to 5, 7, and 8 have been attributed to construction type I. Tumuli 9, 11 to 16, and 24 to 26 are ascribed to type II, while tumuli 10, 17 to 22, 27 and 28 represent type III.

In general, tumuli of types I and II were equipped with the richest inventories in terms of pottery (see Volume II) and animal offerings, suggesting that only the elite were buried in these two types of tombs at El-Zuma (see Volume I, Chapter 8). As shown in the discussion part (see Chapter 8 in this volume), the discovery of imported stone beads, metal bells, and an iron cross in tumuli of types I and II supports this notion. The most elaborate pieces of silver and gold jewellery, as well as an ivory gaming set, were found in tumulus 4 (type I), indicating that it may have been an elite burial.

The author has presented elsewhere an overview of the ornaments found in all of the tumuli excavated at El-Zuma (Then-Obluska 2016c; 2017). Therefore, this chapter will provide comprehensive descriptions of the materials and techniques used to make these ornaments, as well as indicate their provenance and parallels. It will also provide quantitative analysis and present complete catalogues detailing context and macroscopic observations. Additionally, the chapter will summarize the results of chemical composition analysis of glass beads, which has helped identify the provenance of these finds.