

# SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society

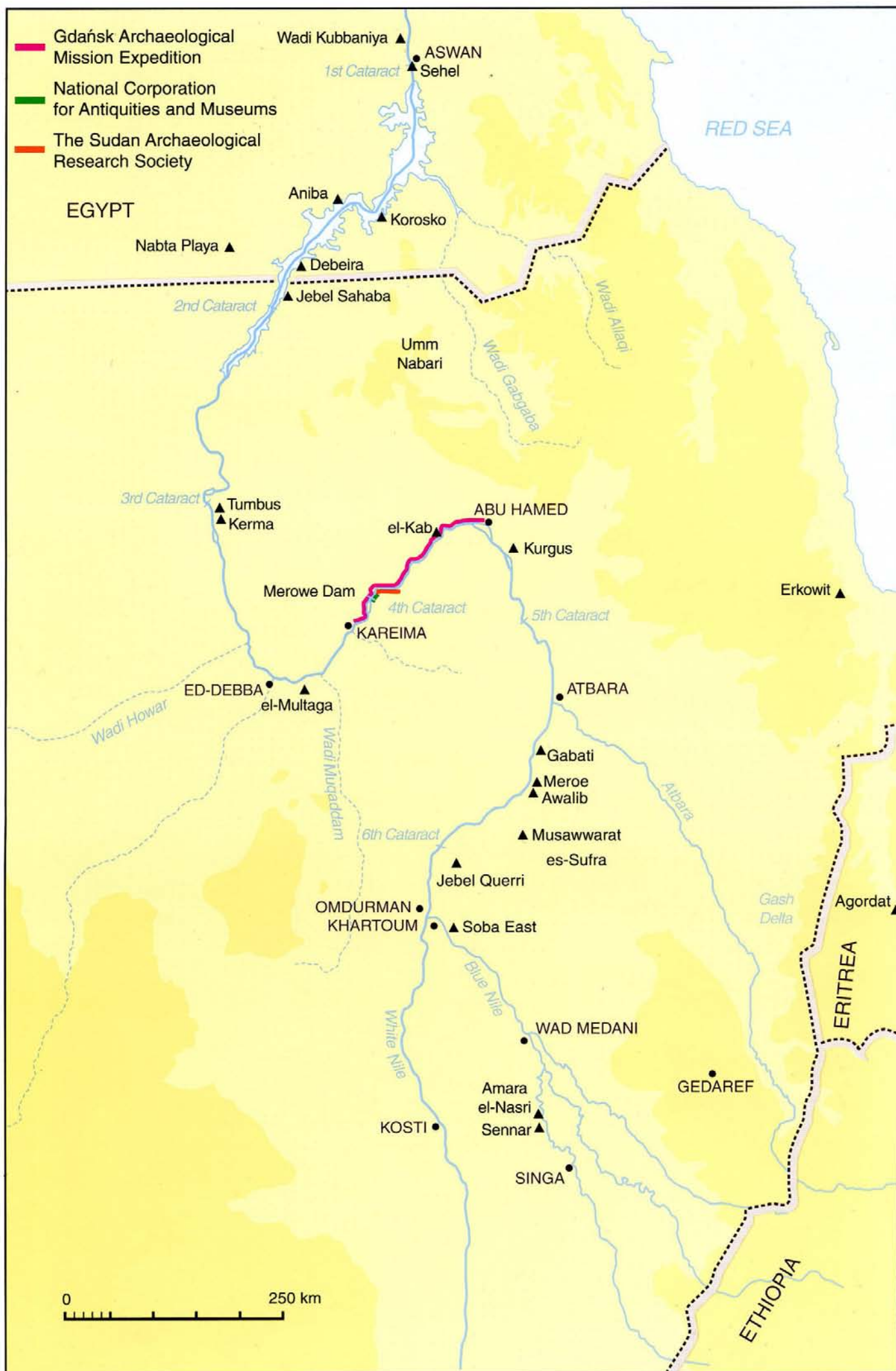


*Bulletin No. 7*

2003







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## Introduction

*Vivian Davies*

The Society's two major events of the year, the results of which are published here - the Kirwan Memorial Lecture delivered in October, 2002, and the colloquium on recent fieldwork held in May, 2003 - were extremely well attended. The colloquium incorporated a special session, led by Dr. Salah Mohamed Ahmed, NCAM Director of Excavations, on the Merowe Dam salvage project. The response has been encouraging. Since the colloquium, several organisations have applied for concessions, joining the existing four missions of Gdańsk, NCAM, the French Unit and SARS. Many more are still needed. Interested parties should contact Dr Salah at NCAM tel./fax. 249 11 786784 or the International Society for Nubian Studies c/o dwelsby@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk.





## The Amri to Kirbekan Survey: the 2002-2003 season

*Derek A. Welsby*

In the 1940s a proposal was put forward for a new dam at the Fourth Cataract. During talks in 1950 and 1951 Sudan agreed to allow the Egyptian Government to begin construction, but the decision to go ahead with the Aswan High Dam caused the project to be shelved. There was renewed interest in a Fourth Cataract Dam, by the Sudan Government, in the 1980s and throughout the 90s the threat of the dam's construction ebbed and flowed making attempts to raise money and support for an archaeological rescue campaign difficult. Over the last few years, however, the dam project has become a reality. Already the access roads and a branch line of the Kareima to Abu Hamed railway have been built to the dam site and new towns to house the construction workers have been completed (see Salah Mohamed Ahmed, above).

In response to an appeal from the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums for foreign missions to assist with the archaeological salvage campaign, SARS undertook a season of survey in the threatened region late in 1999.<sup>1</sup> Last winter SARS, in conjunction with the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, began the first of a projected three-season campaign of excavation within the SARS concession on the left bank of the Nile between Amri and Kirbekan and on the adjacent islands. The first season, under the direction of the writer, was devoted to the excavation of cemeteries located during the 1999 survey; the succeeding two seasons, under the direction of Dr Dorian Fuller, will concentrate on settlements.

The team of 12<sup>2</sup> was in the field from early December 2002 until mid February 2003 and was based in the village of et-Tereif.

The 1999 survey, which concentrated on a small area between Birti and et-Tereif on the left bank of the Nile and on 15 of the adjacent islands (Welsby 2003, figs 1.1, 1.2 and 1.4), located many cemeteries of which those of the post-Meroitic and medieval periods were the most abundant and readily recognisable. Many of the other cemeteries located

could not be closely dated on morphological grounds. Last winter an attempt was made to excavate a representative sample of graves covered by the different types of tomb monuments. The following is a summary of the work undertaken:

Site	Period	Graves excavated
3-J-23	Medieval	47
3-J-26	Neolithic (?)	1
3-J-28	?	1
3-J-29	?	3
3-O-1	Post-Meroitic	5
3-O-12	Kushite (Napatan)	5
4-F-6	Medieval (?)	
4-F-38	Pan Grave (?)	2
4-F-71	Kushite	1
4-F-74	Kushite (Napatan)	3
4-F-76	Kerma Classique – Pharaonic (New Kingdom)	3
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### Site 3-J-23

This medieval cemetery lies a few hundred metres to the east of et-Tereif on a low mound at the edge of the alluvium alongside the Nile, close to the edge of the rocky hills which delimit the river valley (Plate 1). An initial survey of the site documented the presence of 71 grave monuments. Most of these were box graves constructed of irregular blocks of stone infilled with other blocks, gravel, pebbles and earth attaining a maximum height of 650mm. All were aligned approximately east-west, that is parallel to the river at this point. There are also several rings of stone approximately 2.5-3.5m in diameter. Two areas were chosen for excavation:



*Plate 1. General view of the medieval cemetery at 3-J-23 looking north east.*

**Area (A)** contained eight box graves, with large monuments overlying the burials of adults and much smaller ones covering the graves of children (Plate 2). After the detailed planning of the monuments they were half sectioned and subsequently removed to reveal earth-filled grave cuts in the mixed alluvium and coarse sand deposits. The graves were all long narrow cuts. A typical example for an adult burial was 1.3m in length, 0.37m wide and 0.98m in depth. The graves of the children were both smaller and shallower. All the bodies

<sup>1</sup> The project had been planned for the winter of 1998-9 but diplomatic difficulties between Sudan and the UK forced a postponement.

<sup>2</sup> Team membership: Mahmoud Suleiman Mohammed (antiquities officer), Mohammed Jalal Hashim (ethnographer), Andrew Ginns (archaeologist), Margaret Judd (physical anthropologist), Ben Neal (archaeologist), Piotr Osypiński (prehistorian), Pip Stephenson (archaeologist), Isabella Welsby Sjöström (assistant director, finds specialist), Derek Welsby (director), Rachel Welsby (volunteer). Hillary Collard joined the project as a volunteer for 10 days and Dorian Fuller for three weeks. Esh-Sheikh Ahmed Ziyada from NCAM was the cook during the first half of the season and thereafter Mohammed Ibrahim Mahmoud.





*Plate 2. Box graves in Area A looking north east.*

were laid on their backs with the head to the west. All were naturally mummified to some extent with extensive remains of skin surviving along with abundant remains of textiles in which the bodies had been wrapped. The only grave goods noted was a small basket (Plate 3). Subsequent removal of the overlying loose earth and gravely sand revealed four more graves, three of which extended out of the excavation area and, therefore, were not further investigated. The character of the burial lying fully within the excavation area was no different from the later burials already investigated. No indication was found to explain why these graves lacked surviving grave monuments; were they never provided with such structures or had the monuments been removed during the continued use of the cemetery?



*Plate 3. Basket accompanying the body in grave 3-J-23(A)23.*

**Area (B)** lay a little to the east of Area A and included five box graves and one ring of stones (tumulus) 3m in diameter. After the excavation of these graves, cleaning of the surface revealed further graves. The subsequent removal of the uppermost deposits exposed yet more graves that included 14 either partly sealed by, or lying within, the tumulus. All were Christian burials generally with the bodies buried on their back in an extended position with the head to the west and with the hands either alongside the body or over the pelvis. In some burials in both areas the head was protected



*Plate 4. Stones protecting the head in grave 3-J-23(A)17.*

by stones (Plate 4) or by mud bricks, while other graves had a ledge along each long side on which stones were placed to protect the whole body. Two bodies of infants were placed in shallow side niches dug a little below the level of the main grave cut; the opening of the niche was closed by stone slabs or by mud bricks that rested against the side of the grave. Other graves had stones, and in one case some red bricks, forming a layer high up in the fill. A number of bodies were still wrapped in textile in a remarkable state of preservation (Plate 5). Several burials are of particular interest because their bone epiphyses were bright blue in colour; this blue was preserved on the skin in one case. Adjacent bones were the usual pale cream to white colour. No explanation for this phenomenon is at present available.<sup>3</sup> The infant burials in the side-niche graves had their heads to the east as did one adult buried towards the centre of the area later defined by the tumulus. This adult burial clipped the edge of an infant burial and totally overlay two others; these three infants were extended on their backs. Two individuals were buried with a small iron cross at the neck.

Although within the areas chosen for excavation there were only 15 box graves and one tumulus visible on the surface, 50 graves were located of which 47 were excavated. Assum-

<sup>3</sup> Samples are currently being tested for chemical composition by the Department of Scientific Research at the British Museum.





Plate 5. Body of a juvenile from grave 3-J-23(B)119 wrapped in textile.

ing a similar ratio of grave monuments to graves throughout the cemetery, something which cannot be proven without total excavation, there may be approximately 220 graves in total. This dramatically highlights the problems of interpreting survey data when not supported by excavation.

### Site 3-J-26

On the hilltop 450m to the south of the medieval cemetery is a flat area among the rocky outcrops where there is an appreciable amount of pottery of Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic date as well as lithic material.<sup>4</sup> Three 1m square trial pits were excavated, one of which yielded an amount of pottery and lithics; the other two came down almost immediately onto the bedrock. All artefacts were collected and studied along an east-west and a north-south transect 1m wide across the whole site. A low tumulus, a pile of stones approximately 1m in diameter, covered a rectilinear grave pit containing the body of an adult female buried in a crouched position on her right side with the head to the south facing east. The pelvis has been rotated so that its dorsal aspect faced upwards. Although the feet remained *in situ* the long

bones of the legs had been snapped in half and arranged in a pile within the grave fill. At least one leg was still articulated when this occurred. Several small beads were found at the neck. The date of this grave is uncertain as it cannot be directly associated with the artefacts found in the vicinity.

### Site 3-J-28

One of the two prominent cairns on the hilltop overlooking the medieval cemetery at 3-J-23 was examined. It covered a crouched inhumation of a young female who wore several bone finger rings. To the west of the grave pit, but still under the tumulus, was a small circular pit containing pottery sherds.

### Site 3-J-29

Three prominent cairns occupying a low ridge were excavated. One covered a large oval grave within which was laid a spread-eagled body face down (Plate 6), a highly unusual burial attitude. The other graves contained crouched inhumations. No diagnostic grave goods were found.



Plate 6. The spread-eagled body in grave 3-J-29(1)6.

### Site 3-O-1

This cemetery lies approximately 1.2km up the Wadi et-Tereif from its confluence with the Nile.<sup>5</sup> Five of the 26 tumuli were excavated. Four of these were of the egg-shaped type noted during the SARS 1999 survey and the other was circular (Welsby 2003, 19-20, pls 2.19-2.22). The former have a well-constructed revetment which survives much higher

<sup>4</sup> For previous work on this site see Welsby 2003, 16, fig. 2.12; Usai 2003, 83-5.

<sup>5</sup> For previous work on this site see Welsby 2003, 19-20, fig. 2.17. The finds from the survey were of Middle Palaeolithic and Neolithic date, although the tumuli are clearly post-Meroitic.



towards the point of the tumulus. At the point of tumulus (10) was a small lamp box formed of two stones set on edge with a flat slab placed as a cover (visible in Welsby 2003, pl. 2.22). Lamp boxes are a common feature of Christian graves but hitherto have not been noted associated with tumuli. The round tumulus (3) and the egg-shaped tumuli (4) and (5) are linked by low walls of stone as are tumuli (10) and (11). In the former group the linking wall between (4) and (5) appears to be later than both monuments; that between (3) and (4) may be broadly contemporary with tumulus (3). The linking wall in the other group is certainly later than tumulus (10) but may be contemporary with tumulus (11). Tumulus (3) is surrounded by a shallow ditch presumably the source of the tumulus makeup. Each tumulus was quarter-sectioned revealing that originally the monuments were of a very different form to how they appear today. The stratigraphy visible in the section indicates that they were constructed as conical mounds and would have appeared not dissimilar to those still well preserved at ez-Zuma, for example. Now they are flat on top sloping down from the point, the result of robbing and erosion, from which all the tumuli have suffered.

Of the grave-cuts three were trapezoidal with sloping descendaries, one was rectangular and one was roughly circular. At the bottom of the east-west descender in the rectilinear grave cuts was a narrow oval niche with its long axis north-south. Each niche contained a single individual. That under tumulus (10) was of an adult which had been much disturbed by the robbers but two large beer jars, a small jar and a bowl remained *in situ*. A string of cylindrical glazed-composition beads, a leather object and traces of another object painted red, black and white, remained in the grave. Under tumulus (4) the body of an adult male, laid on its right side with the head to the east facing north, was placed at the south end of the chamber. The head had, however, been ripped from the body and placed behind it against the wall of the chamber. One arm had been moved and part of it lay at the bottom of the robber pit. The body was accompanied by 11 pots - seven beer jars, a globular jar, a beaker, two bowls - and four leather containers, which appeared to originally have been of cylindrical shape. The circular grave cut under tumulus (11) led down to a shallow side niche on its south side. This was oval in shape with the long axis aligned east-west within which a body was laid, in the same attitude as the individual under tumulus (4), accompanied by three beer jars, a wide-mouthed jar and a bowl (Plate 7). This bowl was decorated with incised pendant triangles on the exterior, five groups of circular incisions on the rim, and radial lines in red slip in the interior. Many beads were found by the chest of the body.

The descender of tumulus (5) was unusual in that it was filled entirely with large stones, perhaps an attempt to make it immune from the grave robbers although, if this was the case, the ploy failed - it has been robbed like all the others.

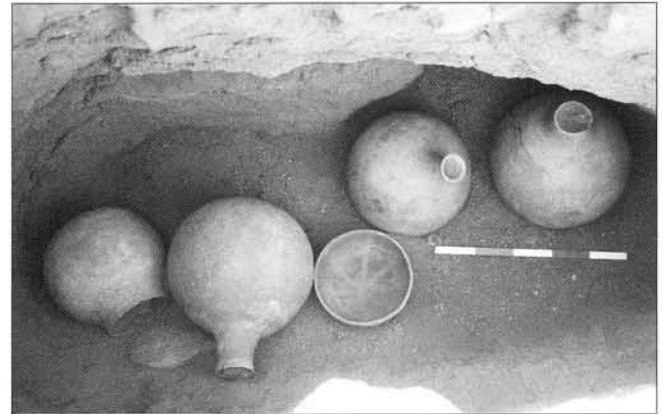


Plate 7. The grave goods accompanying the burial under tumulus 3-O-1(11).

### Site 3-O-3

A Neolithic occupation scatter was examined with material collected from transects and from small areas of excavation.<sup>6</sup> Although sherds from a caliciform beaker, a type of pottery which appears to be only found in a funerary context, had been found on this site in 1999 (Braddock 2003, fig. 3.5, no. 58) no trace of burials was located.

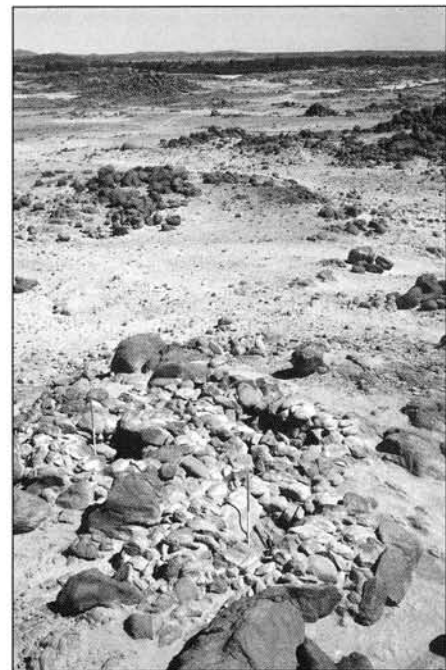


Plate 8. The early Kushite cemetery at 3-O-12 looking north east towards 4-F-74.

### Site 3-O-12

A small cemetery consisting of five oval tomb monuments (Plate 8). Each was constructed of stones which were arranged radially to form an enclosed area approximately

<sup>6</sup> For the lithics recovered from here during the 1999 survey see Usai 2003, 86-88.





750mm deep which extended down to the bedrock. Of the bodies and the grave goods virtually no trace was found either in the graves or in their vicinity. The character of the monuments is very similar to those at site 4-F-74 and this site is presumably also of early Kushite date.

#### Site 4-F-6

Set along a narrow rocky ridge were many small stone monuments. Each consisted of a circular chamber, about 1m in diameter internally, set on the bedrock and roofed at a height sometimes in excess of 1m by a roughly constructed corbelled vault (Welsby 2003, 24, pl. 2.25). Fragments of human bone were found in many of the monuments but not one bone remained *in situ*. Many graves showed clear evidence for robbing with bone fragments strewn on the adjacent ground. If complete bodies had been buried they must have been tightly crouched to fit into the available space. Pottery sherds were recovered from within some graves which were partly filled with rubble from the collapsed roofing and by wind-blown sand. The date of these monuments is uncertain but they may be medieval.

#### Site 4-F-38

Two of the small ring tumuli, which occupied the wide flat top of a low ridge, were excavated.<sup>7</sup> They had been badly disturbed and virtually no pottery and only small amounts of bone were recovered from the graves. Of particular interest was the form of the graves which were markedly 'pan'-shaped, being shallow and roughly circular, but with a small 'niche' to one side. During the 1999 survey pottery considered to be of Pan-Grave type had been found on this site and the form of the graves suggests the presence of people who were interred in Pan-Grave style graves with Pan-Grave style pottery.

#### Site 4-F-71

Set in the bed of the *kebor* a little downstream of site 4-F-76 was the substantial remains of a stone building constructed of large blocks of granite. The structure had been heavily disturbed by robbing activity. Removal of the large amounts of rubble revealed the remains of a pyramid approximately 5.85m square (5.77 x 5.84-5.93m) surviving to a height of about 1m (Colour plates XVI-XVII).<sup>8</sup> To the east was a small offering chapel with external dimensions of 2.6m long and 2.8m wide, which was entered through a doorway 0.8m wide. The whole monument was surrounded by an enclosure wall of very rough construction. Among the rubble was found the capstone of the pyramid, a truncated pyramidal stone

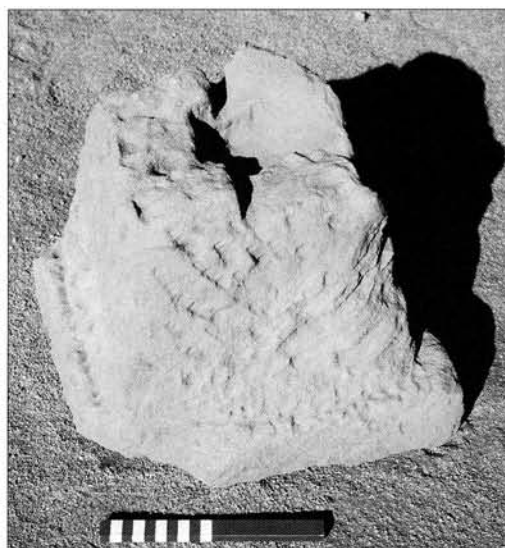


Plate 9. The pyramid's capstone.

with a square socket in the top, made from Nubian sandstone (Plate 9). It bore a small graffito on one face. The underlying tomb was clearly robbed at which time the whole of the centre of the pyramid and its west wall were completely removed. A small gold bead was found among the rubble. The structure was recorded in detail but the robber pit and tomb have yet to be excavated. The pyramid may date to the earlier Kushite period.

#### Site 4-F-74

A closely knit collection of what appear to be nine small ring tumuli cluster around a prominent rock outcrop. This site has been heavily robbed and is strewn with a large amount of pottery and human bone. One half of the cemetery was excavated and only three clear graves were located, each an oval structure made from stone blocks within which the body had presumably been laid. No grave cut had been provided as the ground surface was bedrock. Only fragments of bone and pottery remained in the graves. The quantity of pottery was considerable and the bone fragments indicated the presence of many individuals but everything had been very badly disturbed. The finds included a number of scarabs and *udjat*-eye beads. Among the pottery is a form of ribbed amphora of Egyptian manufacture, which is characteristic of the early Kushite period.

#### Site 4-F-76

A large low mound set in the bed of a shallow *kebor* was covered in fragments of basalt and was of a different character than the other cemeteries noted in the survey area. It had been badly disturbed by robbing activity, although the remains of at least two tumuli were discernable with an inner and outer kerb of large stones delimiting the ring and infilled with the small pieces of basalt. Three graves were found on excavation. In the centre was a small circular grave contain-

<sup>7</sup> For previous work on this site see Welsby 2003, 33-34, pl. 2.33.

<sup>8</sup> This may not be the only pyramid to have been noted in the region. According to Crowfoot and Gleichen 'a few miles beyond Belal (foot of the 4<sup>th</sup> Cataract) and on the south bank are the remains of a Coptic church Bela and fortified monastery. Opposite Hamdab Island, 6 miles further on, are the ruins of a pyramid' (Gleichen 1905, 315).





Plate 10. The double burial in grave 4-F-76, 8.

ing a tightly crouched inhumation of an individual laid on its right side, head to the north facing west. The only object in the grave was an ironstone bangle on the lower arm. Close to this grave to the west was an oval grave lined with stones within which were two contemporary burials. Both were laid on their right side with the head to the north facing west (Plate 10). A small black hemispherical bowl had been placed in the grave under the arm of one skeleton. Immediately to the east of the circular grave was a third grave, oval and lined with stones, which again contained two contemporary crouched inhumations. The western burial was laid on its right side, head to the north facing west, the eastern was laid on its left side, head to the north facing east. No grave goods were noted.

There is no direct stratigraphical relationship between the three graves, but they all appear to be cut into the same surface and the excavators were of the opinion that they were broadly contemporary. Amongst the pottery recovered, much of it strewn on the surface by the grave robbers, was material which included typical Kerma Classique pottery and one painted vessel provisionally dated to the earlier New Kingdom.

#### Site 4-K-203

A small cemetery of 19 graves, most of which were marked on the surface by stone monuments, occupies a low ridge between the confluence of a *wadi* and a *kebor*, which flow north towards the Nile a little to the east of the medieval settlement at el-Kanisa. The grave monuments were formed of concentric rings of upright slabs set into the upper fill of the grave shafts, which were covered in quartzite pebbles.

Many of the grave pits were oval and dug down to the upper surface of the bedrock. Two of the graves had disarticulated bones distributed among their fills. Another was similar but also had a neatly arranged row of long bones, each snapped in half. Other graves contained single articulated skeletons laid in a flexed position, on their right side, head to the east facing north. The hands are usually in front of the face. One grasped a copper-alloy object which may be a rectangular-sectioned tang, another had a copper-alloy mirror in front of the face, while a second copper-alloy mirror was found beneath the knees of another individual. Many skeletons were placed on a leather hide reddened with ochre.

On the edge of one grave pit was a post pipe for a timber 100mm square, perhaps a grave marker(?). Some of the pottery sherds from the surface of the cemetery and from within the grave fills are characteristic of the Kerma Ancien (2500 – 2050 BC) period, as are the form of the graves, the grave monuments and the arrangement of the burials.

#### Site 4-K-204

A cemetery of widely spaced tumuli occupying a flat-topped hill. Several graves were excavated, among them graves covered by cairns of rough stones while others had low ring tumuli. There was a wide diversity in grave type and burial attitude. In one case the body was nestled in a wide crack in the bedrock; elsewhere a regular grave cut had been made into the bedrock where intrusive softer rocks among the granite made the digging of a grave feasible. Some graves appear to be of early Kushite date, others were not closely datable. One individual, placed in a stone-lined grave, was laid on a layer of small branches or palm fronds.





## Artefacts

Among the most interesting material was the pottery from the early Kushite cemeteries. Although clearly dating from the earlier 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC many of the forms could be paralleled among the repertoire of the Kerma Classic potters although the quality of production was significantly lower.

## Ethnographic and place-name survey

Mohammed Jalal Hashim conducted interviews with local inhabitants throughout the eastern and central parts of the survey concession in the area occupied by the Monasir. Among the interesting information he recorded is the fact that the church on Mis Island, Site 3-J-18 (Welsby 2003, 11-13, pl. 2.10), which was considered to be a mosque by the local people, was standing with its roof intact into the 1880s when it was destroyed by the Ansar.

The discoveries made this season are particularly significant. The Kerma Ancien cemetery is the furthest known upstream by a very considerable distance and, together with the discovery of Kerma Moyen and Classique occupation on the other bank of the river by the Gdańsk Archaeological Mission (Paner 1998, fig. 12; Kołosowska *et al.*, this volume),<sup>9</sup> indicates that not only did the Kerma culture extend far upstream of Jebel Barkal, but it did so throughout most of the Kerma Period.<sup>10</sup> If the presence of the Kerma cultural assemblage can be equated with the territorial extent of the Kingdom of Kush, the kingdom clearly controlled an extensive tract of the Nile valley for much of its 1000-year history. The discovery of a granite pyramid still standing to a height of 1m was also totally unexpected. It indicates the presence of an individual of some importance in this region, which has always been considered to be inhospitable and poor.

This perception of the nature of the region as being barren and inhospitable may be very wide of the mark. In one way the region offers an important advantage for human settlement, as long as the population pressure is not too great, over other ostensibly more favourable reaches of the river. At high flood the river is dotted over a considerable distance by innumerable islands. As the river level falls, many of the river channels between these dry up providing extensive *seluka* land. *Seluka* land, which can be utilised for agriculture without the need for irrigation, has always been at a premium and as late as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century made a major contribution to the agricultural productivity of northern Sudan (Hewison 1948, 745). Early last century, before the advent of mechanised water pumps, the cultivation at Berti was described as being very rich and plentiful, with barley, dura,

cotton, wheat, beans, dates, and dukhn grown in great abundance. The island of Ishashi opposite et-Tereif was also very richly cultivated (Gleichen 1905, 39). It is a reasonable assumption that a similar situation obtained in antiquity.

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<sup>9</sup> Kerma Moyen and Classique pottery had been noted in the region by Jean Vercoutter over 20 years ago (Gratien 1978, 21).

<sup>10</sup> The use of the well-established and understood term Kerma culture with its subdivisions, Ancien, Moyen, Classique and Recente seems entirely appropriate to describe the remains in this area dating between 2500 and 1500 BC.





*Colour plate XVI. The Amri to Kirebkan Survey. Remains of the granite pyramid at 4-F-71 looking west.*



*Colour plate XVII. The Amri to Kirebkan Survey. The south-east angle of the granite pyramid at 4-F-71 looking west.*