

# SUDAN & NUBIA

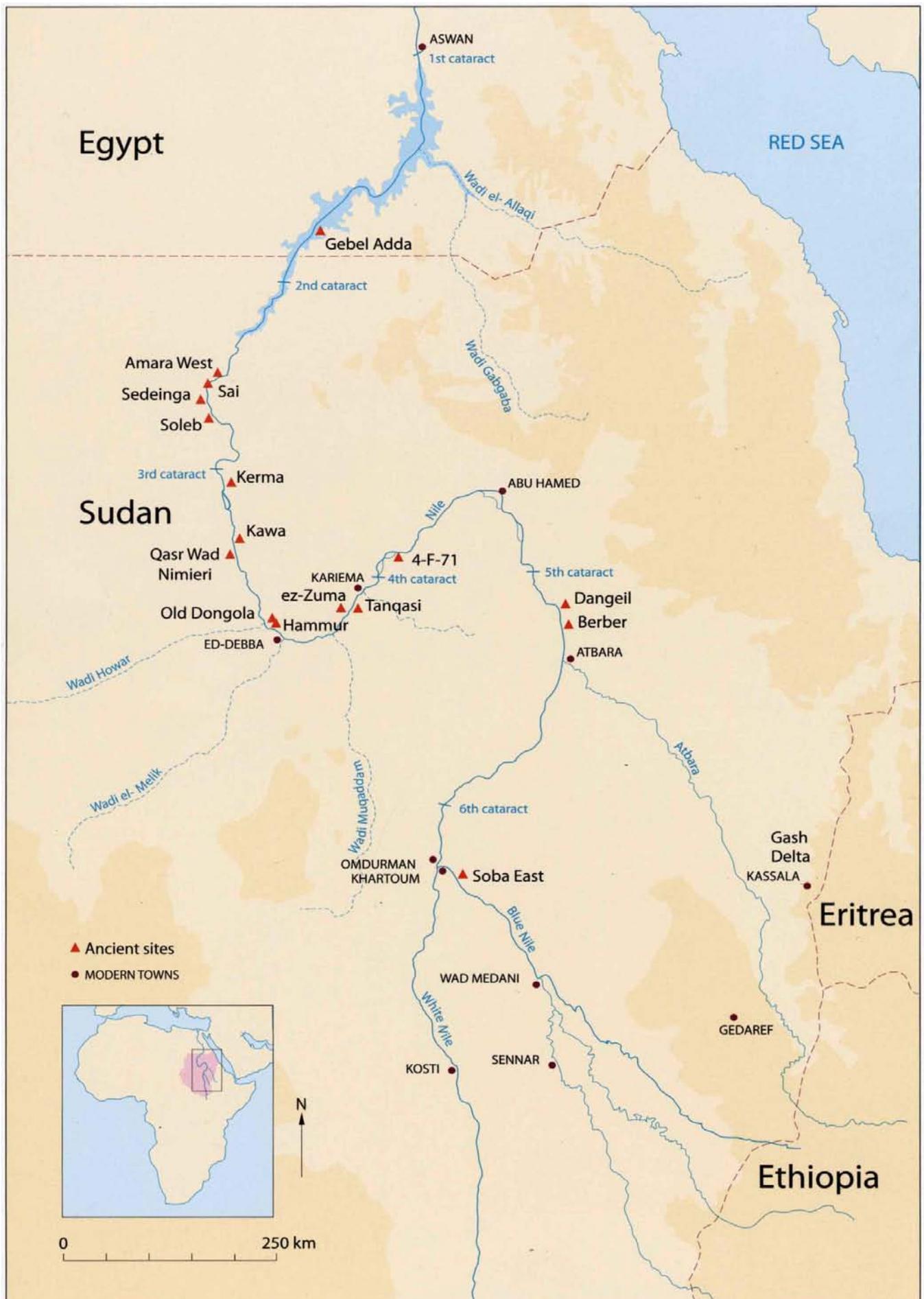
The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



*Bulletin No. 14*

2010





# SUDAN & NUBIA

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Front cover: Berber Meroitic Cemetery. Tomb, BMC 8, showing grave goods, the extended position of the skeleton and the remains of a coffin (photo: Mahmoud Suleiman Bashir).

*Sudan & Nubia* is a peer-reviewed journal

## Gebel Adda Cemetery One, 1963. Post-medieval reuse of X-Group tumuli

*Reinhard Huber and David N. Edwards*

During January 1963, the Nubian Expedition of the American Research Center began its first season of work at Gebel Adda undertaking a number of projects, including a survey of surface remains on the citadel, and a survey of (medieval/Christian) Cemetery Two, some 150m to the south of the Citadel towards (late X-Group) Cemetery One. This cemetery stretched from the southern end of the concession towards the northern end of Wadi el-Ur. Excavations of the cemeteries were also begun, first in Cemetery One, and then in Cemetery Three, at the foot of the citadel. This brief report is concerned with excavations in Cemetery One, which started at its southern end (Figure 1), where some 170 tombs were excavated. These included 130 'X-Group' tumuli, 30 early medieval (Christian) graves and 10 post-medieval (Islamic) burials of various types. The group of Christian graves were cut into the bedrock and had side-ledges to support the stone slabs which covered the burial (Plate 1). Two of them had a lateral side chamber, which were closed with inclined flat stones. All the Christian burials were extended burials, oriented west-east, with the head to the east.

At least six tumuli in the cemetery had previously been tested by a team from the University of Alexandria in 1959

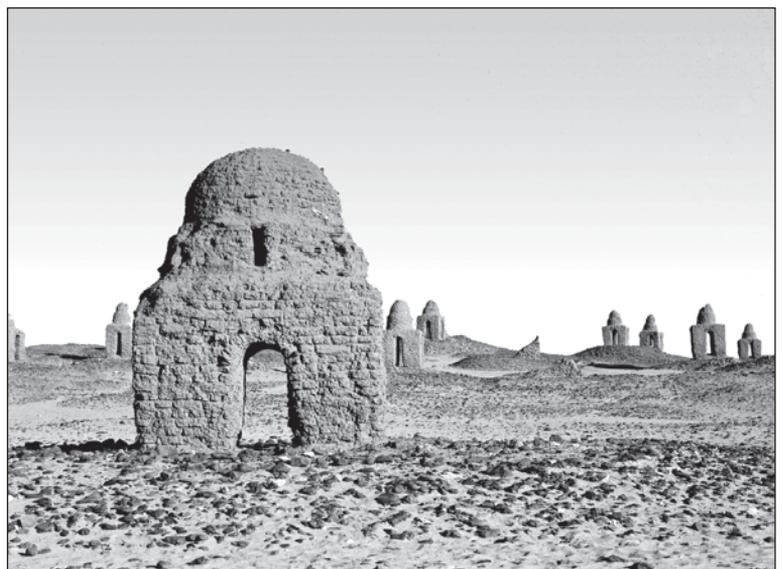


*Plate 1. Medieval (Christian) burial in Cemetery One, one of 30 early medieval (Christian) graves excavated on the south-western edge of the cemetery (photo R. Huber).*

(El-Amir 1963). Confronted with such an enormous archaeological challenge in the Gebel Adda concession, the limited time and resources demanded that most of the graves were excavated as fast as possible, in the usual time-saving technique of following the plunderer's hole down to the burial chamber (Millet 1963, 150). However, even though time was pressing, with only three additional excavation seasons to go, the first author was given the opportunity by Dr Nicholas Millet to excavate one tumulus more systematically using the quadrant method.

Tumulus No. 151, located in the north-east part of this area of the cemetery (Figures 1 and 7), was selected for examination, being one of the larger post-Meroitic tumuli. This tumulus (along with four others in this cemetery) had latterly had an Islamic burial (registered as tomb No. 136) inserted into its top, marked by a prominent mud-brick domed superstructure. Nearly all the Islamic tombs were so located, the only exception being to the east of the Citadel, in Cemeteries Three and Four, where a few double-domed tombs were constructed on the flat desert surface. In that area, the ground surface comprised softer alluvial deposits making the excavation of graves easier, which suggest that the attraction of reusing old tumuli was at least in part practical. Overall, there were at least 50 Islamic tombs of similar architecture, but showing some variation in the upper domes, varying from a hemi-spherical (Plate 2) to the more common parabolic form (Plate 3).

This report provides information on this excavation, based on records held by Reinhard Huber, otherwise only briefly reported in the preliminary reports published by Millet in the 1960s (Millet 1963; 1964; 1967a; 1967b; 1968). This X-Group burial was noted in passing in Millet's report for 1963 as 'a particularly rich tomb, perhaps to be dated to the first half of the Sixth Century ... included a moulded rawhide shield [sic] of strange shape and two toothed iron pruning-hooks of the



*Plate 2. Example of an Islamic tomb superstructure with a larger hemi-spherical dome with open slots at its base, in the cemetery east of the citadel (photo R. Huber).*

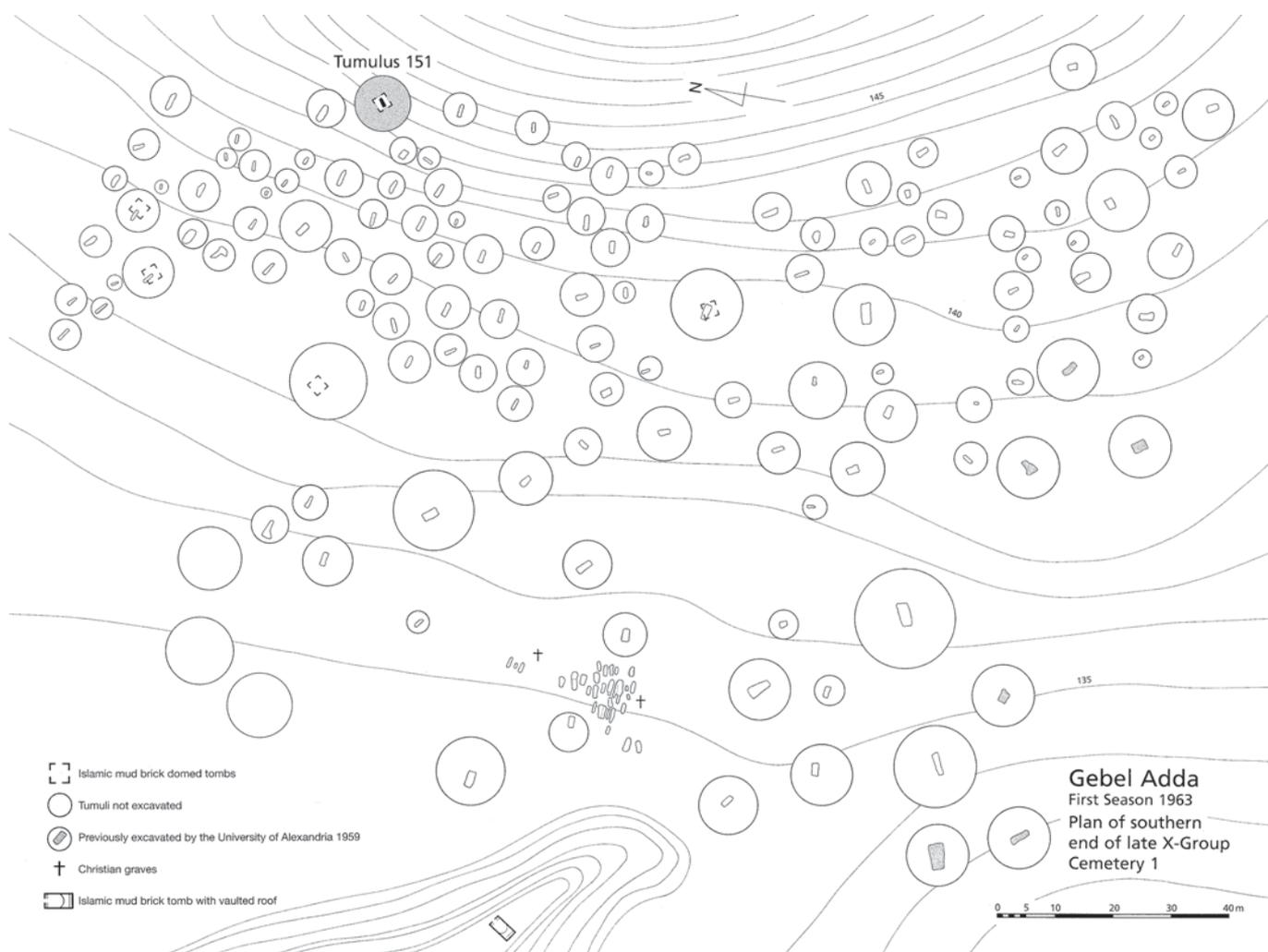


Figure 1. Plan of southern end of Cemetery One, Gebel Adda (drawn by R. Huber).

pattern still used in Nubia today by women cutting scrub or gathering firewood' (1963, 153). A few pottery vessels from Cemetery One were also illustrated in that report including the unusual spouted pot and lid #19 (Millet 1963, fig. 3).

#### *Islamic Tomb No. 136*

The top part of the tumulus was excavated quarter by quarter down to the floor level of the mud-brick vaulted burial chamber. Superstructure, burial chamber and stratigraphy were recorded in plan, short and long sections. As was usual in Gebel Adda, the rectangular burial chambers for the Islamic burials were dug into the centre of the earlier plunderer's hole, then the ground was covered with mud plaster and a mud-brick wall at the southern end was built to support the pressure of the inclined barrel vault. The deceased was then placed in the chamber, head to the south west facing the prescribed direction. With the blocking closed the whole structure was then coated outside with mud plaster and finally was filled with debris to the height of the vault. Above the vault a rectangular pavement of mud bricks was laid which served as a base for the superstructure (Figure 2). As far as the first author is aware the domed superstructures were

always placed above the tomb entrance. Four L-shaped corner piers ending in arches supported the double dome (Figure 3).

In the case of Tomb No. 136 the superstructure was rectangular, with external dimensions 1.8m by 1.45m. The



Plate 3. Tomb superstructures of a more conical form towards the north-east end of the concession near Wadi el-Ur (photo R. Huber).

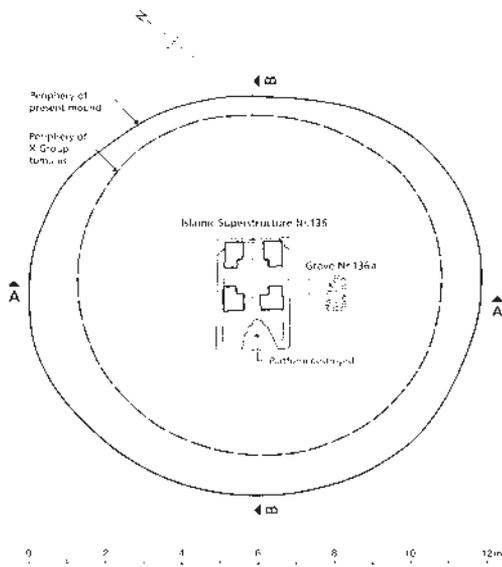


Figure 2. Plan of tumulus No. 151, Islamic tomb superstructure No. 136 and infant burial (scale 1:200; drawing R. Huber).

top of the dome was partly broken, and at the base it was slightly oval in shape. It is safe to assume that the facade of all the tombs had once a finish of mud plaster, but due to erosion no traces could be found on this monument. The average size of the mud bricks was 320-350 x 150 x 80mm (Plate 4). Opposite this structure, an empty space (1.45 x 0.8m) was left on the platform, and may have been used for funerary or commemorative rites (Figure 3). Dislodged



Plate 4. Superstructure of Tomb No. 136, Cemetery One (photo R. Huber).

from their presumed original position on the platform, four very small crudely made and unfired clay bowls were found (Figure 5, # 1- 4). Similar occurrences were also noted at other Islamic tombs.

In the course of removing the blocking and the vault, the tomb chamber was cleaned of wind-blown sand and broken mud bricks. It was apparent that the blocking had been reopened several times after the original burial to insert a series of later interments. At the opposite end of the superstructure, the platform and parts of the vault were damaged as was the case in many other tombs. Apparently from there, animals

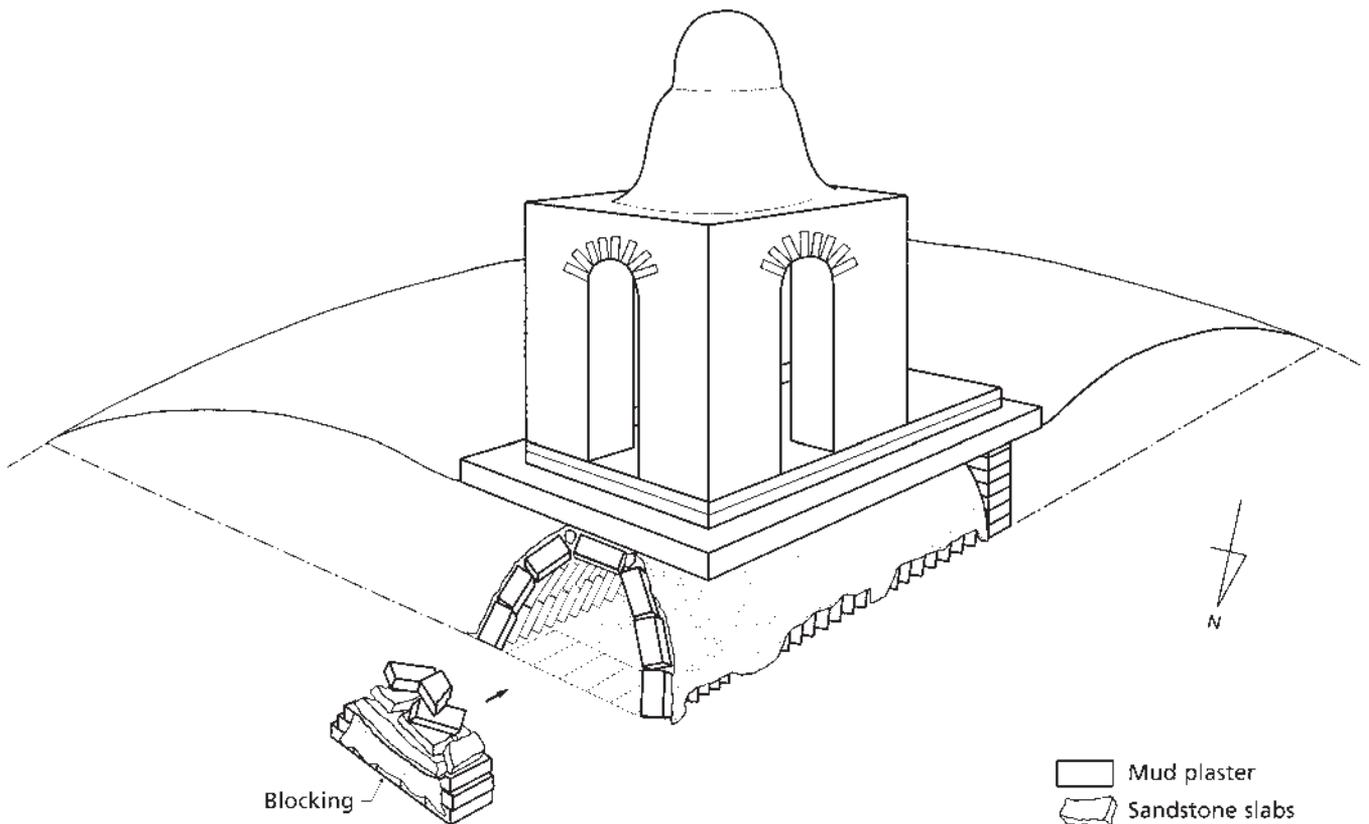


Figure 3. Schematic drawing showing the construction of the Islamic tomb and superstructure No. 136 (drawing R. Huber).

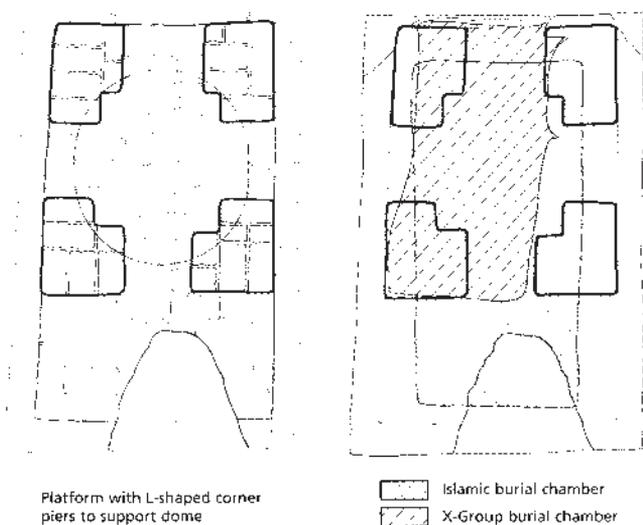


Figure 4. Plans of the Islamic tomb superstructure and burial (scale 1:50; drawing R. Huber).

must have entered the chamber and disturbed and removed parts of the skeletal material. Below this opening the skulls of three adults, an adolescent and one infant were strewn about (Figure 4). Here a copper-alloy earring was found (Figure 5, # 5). The long bones of three adults, femurs and tibias with the knees bent, were located at the other end. In the middle of the chamber, a fragment of a coarse wool cloth covered parts of small bone fragments. This tomb was unusual because of the lack of intact bone material. The burials within the other tombs located to the north and closer to the citadel seem to have been in better condition.

Beside Tomb No. 136, a further small grave had been dug into the surface of the tumulus. Placed in the shallow trench the remains of an infant were found, buried in the prescribed direction. It wore a leather amulet around its neck (Figure 5, # 7). The trench was lined with a layer of mud bricks and was covered with flat stones.

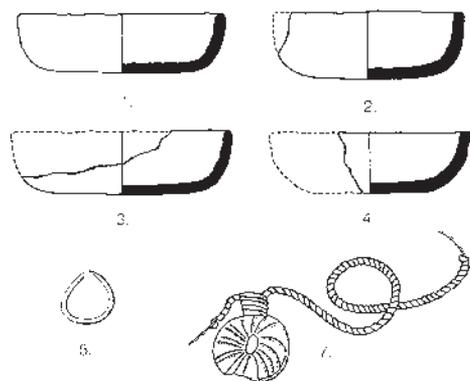
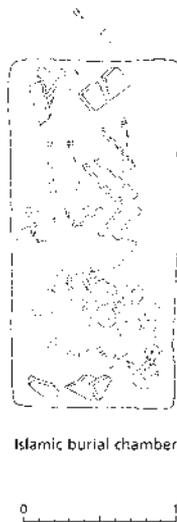


Figure 5. Unfired dishes from the surface of the Islamic burial. Copper-alloy earring and leather amulet from infant burial (scale 1:2; drawn R. Huber).

#### X-Group Tumulus No. 151

Continuing excavation in the same quadrant method, the original X-Group tumulus was then excavated down to the



level of the bedrock. With an original diameter of about 10m, the tumulus was one of the largest in the cemetery. Although the upper part was flattened by the plunderers and the builders of the Islamic tomb, the original height of the mound could be estimated to about 2.3m.

After removing the debris from the ramp and the barrel vault, it was found that this tomb also had a large plunderer's hole. However, as the burial chamber was exposed it became clear that much material from the original burial had survived (Plate 5, Figure 6). The ramp leading down to the chamber was roughly hewn out of the bedrock. On both sides of the chamber, at a height of about 550mm, a ledge was cut out of the rock to support the vault. Along the west wall some wooden fragments of an *angareeb* bed-frame were found. Surviving traces of four wooden legs enabled us to calculate that originally it had measured *c.* 1.75 x 0.6m. It occupied most of the floor space leaving only a narrow space 200mm wide alongside the opposite wall. It may well also have served as a bier to carry the deceased to the tomb. The length of the bed had created a problem since it protruded over the first layer of the mud-brick blocking and at the other end the rock had to be carved out to gain the necessary space. Small fragments of the woven parts of the *angareeb* were also found.

The interior of the chamber had been badly disturbed by intruders (at an unknown time prior to the construction of



Plate 5. Burial chamber with disturbed burial, Tomb No. 151. Chamber blocking, breastplate and the dog beyond (photo R. Huber).

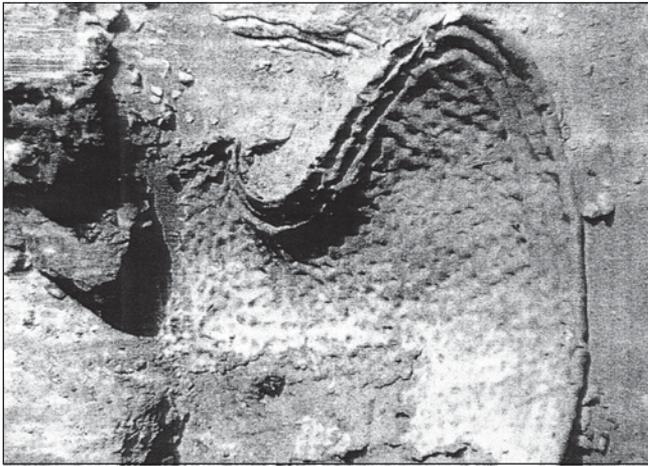


Plate 6. Part of breastplate/ armour deposited on the access ramp of tomb chamber (photo R. Huber).

the Islamic tomb) and the objects were found in some disarray (Figure 6). While the chamber and the *angareeb* were oriented south west/north east the bones of an adult male were strewn over the centre of the chamber, suggesting that the body was originally laid on its side in a crouched position with the head at the south-west end. Some personal items (tweezers and a pick) were found at the waist attached to leather strings (Figure 8, #39). The pottery and other objects seem to have

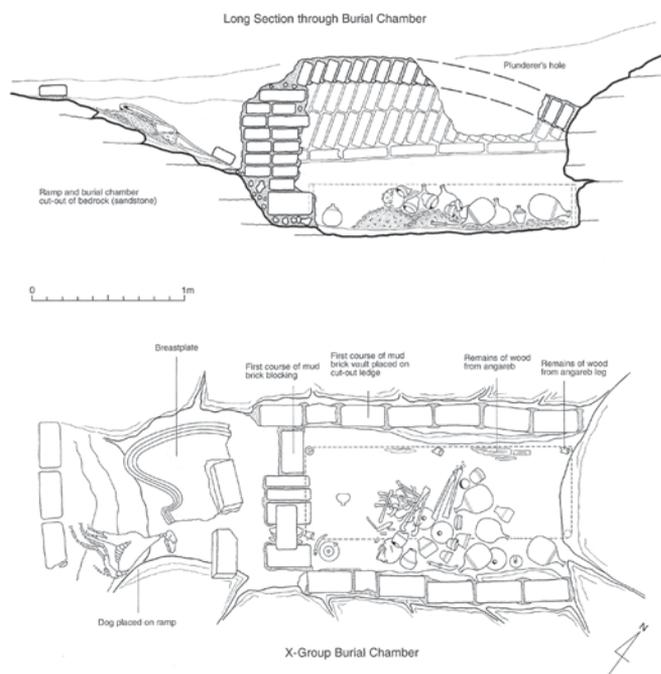


Figure 6. Plan and section through X-Group burial (scale 1:50).

originally been placed in the narrow space between the bier and the east wall of the chamber, but were also in disarray.

The chamber blocking and vault were constructed of mud bricks with an average size of 300 x 150 x 80mm. The outside of the blocking and the vault were covered in a mud-plaster render. On the ramp, a fragment of a moulded reptile (crocodile?) hide was found (Plate 6). Only part of the top and

left side were preserved; the right side and lower parts were missing. The hide was held in place by a mud brick. To give it stability, the form of the hide was framed by three round borders. The original width was about 1m and leather strips may have been used to fasten it at the back, although no traces of these were found. Its original length is unclear. This seems likely to have been a piece of armour and may be compared with an excellently preserved example of 'moulded hide' body armour found in an X-Group context at Qasr Ibrim in 1974. This was thought to have been made of ox hide which had been 'moulded and tooled into a complex pattern of raised bosses and ribbed surfaces' (Plumley 1975, 24, pl. XIV, 3). The Ibrim example suggests that the half-rounded section in the image (Plate 6) represents an arm socket. This example from Gebel Adda, however, may perhaps be compared with a form of crocodile skin armour known from Roman Egypt,<sup>1</sup> while a recent find of what appears to be a leather shield in a post-Meroitic context in the Fourth Cataract region (Żurawski 2010, 208, fig. 36) must also be noted.

Accompanying the deceased, the body of a dog had been deposited on the ramp. As the final act of the burial three mud bricks, placed at a right angle to the axis of the ramp, were laid on the surface. The tumulus was then erected directly over the grave and was covered with black ironstones. To the right of the infant's grave and in the undisturbed soil of the tumulus, a deposit of three cups (Figure 8, #10-12) was found, representing some activity at the burial site during or after the construction of the tumulus.

Full records of the objects recovered from the tomb remain in the unpublished project archives in the Royal Ontario Museum, but the materials can be briefly described here on the basis of the excavator's field notes and field drawings (Figure 8). The pottery from the tomb chamber included a series of seven necked jars, likely to be Adams Ware R1, two examples with painted decoration. The forms are similar to those commonly found at Qustul (Williams 1991, fig. 14), although it may be noted that such decoration is more rarely encountered in Lower Nubian collections of this date. With these were found a further four goblets and six cups/small bowls, most undecorated, two small oil bottles/flasks and a spouted jar with lid (Figure 8, #19). A woven basketry cover/plate (#34) of a type found in large numbers in post-Meroitic contexts at Qasr Ibrim was found with one goblet (#22). The spouted jar was illustrated in the 1963 preliminary report (Millet 1963, fig. 3). Its decoration is unusual and may perhaps be related to its funerary context. Two iron knives/sickles were also deposited with the pottery. Some metal toiletry instruments were found in the waist area of the body, tied by leather thongs (Figure 8, #39). Part of a string of stone beads was also recovered, arranged as seven white, four orange and six blue beads. Fragments of leather

<sup>1</sup> See for example crocodile skin armour in the British Museum collections (EA5473), supposed to be of 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century date. [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search\\_the\\_collection\\_database.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database.aspx) Thanks to Derek Welsby for advice on this point.



**Gebel Adda**  
First Season 1963  
Cemetery 1

Islamic Tomb Nr.136  
Infant Grave Nr.136a  
X-Group Tumulus Nr.151

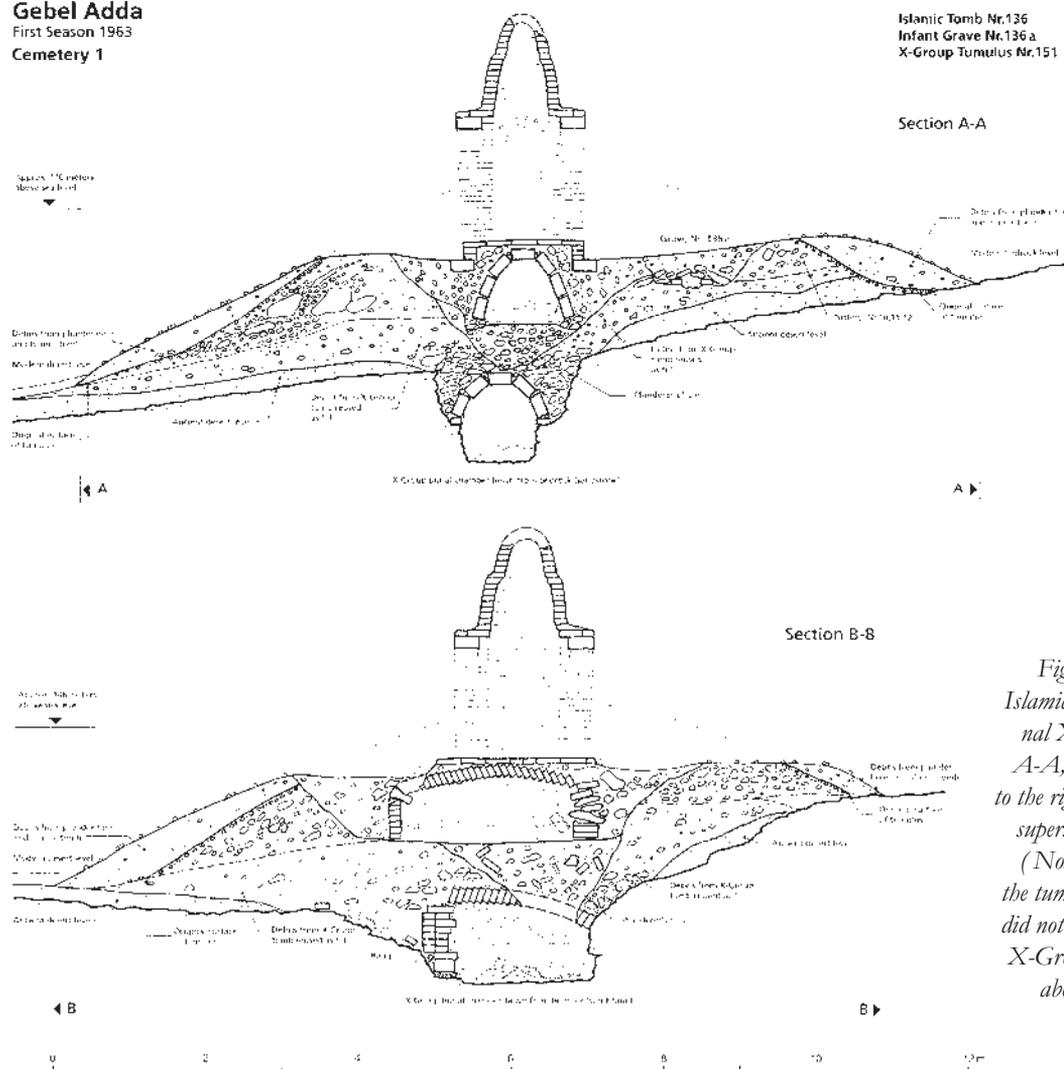


Figure 7. Sections through the Islamic burial, tumulus and original X-Group burial. In Section A-A, the infant burial is located to the right (east) of the mud-brick superstructure and the three cups (No. 10-12) were found within the tumulus fill. The Islamic tomb did not intrude on the vault of the X-Group tomb (there is a gap of about 650mm) (scale 1:100).

sandals and other leatherwork were recorded, the tooled leatherwork fragments (#37-38) comparable with materials from the often elaborate leather quivers found elsewhere at the site (e.g. Millet 1963, fig. 7).

### Conclusion

It is hoped that this brief report on this burial complex from Gebel Adda will be of interest for presenting a detailed record of a post-Meroitic (X-group) tumulus burial and its subsequent utilisation. While generally unremarkable, this particular burial has some added interest in the recovery of another piece of post-Meroitic body armour, as well as the dog burial, both relatively rarely encountered. The Islamic tombs of Gebel Adda with their distinctive superstructures are of considerable interest, and this perhaps uniquely detailed study of one tomb provides further valuable information on these still enigmatic structures. At present, it seems likely that these relate to an Ottoman presence when Adda appears to have served as an outpost of the principal garrisons located at Sai and Qasr Ibrim. This type of tomb superstructure has an interesting distribution in Lower and Middle Nubia. A few examples of similar structures have

recently been identified in the Third Cataract region, at Jebel Wahaba by the Kajbar cataract (SBU034), and associated with a small enclosed settlement site at Kadamusa (cemetery KDA001) a few miles down river, opposite Narnarti island (el-Zein 2010). There is another group of such tombs in a cemetery at Hamid-Kuchungi, on the west bank opposite Sai island (Vila 1979, 112, fig. 71), while a single structure with a double-dome is known from Kulb West (site 21-R-1). Further potentially comparable tombs also occur in Lower Nubia, with an example at Jebel Sahaba (Gardberg 1970, pl. 61), others were recorded in the 1930s by Monneret de Villard, for example at Agargia (in Adams 1987, fig. 7). At Qasr Ibrim there is a single example of a rather similar structure on the plateau behind the main settlement. Investigations of that tomb suggest that the original burial was of medieval date, with later use and re-use in the post-medieval period, although no evidence was found which might provide a more precise date for the extant superstructure (Barnard 1994, 54-7).

Overall, such tomb superstructures raise some interesting questions as to their date and significance. They were a very visible presence in some parts of the Nubian landscape, while representing a very distinctive burial form within the

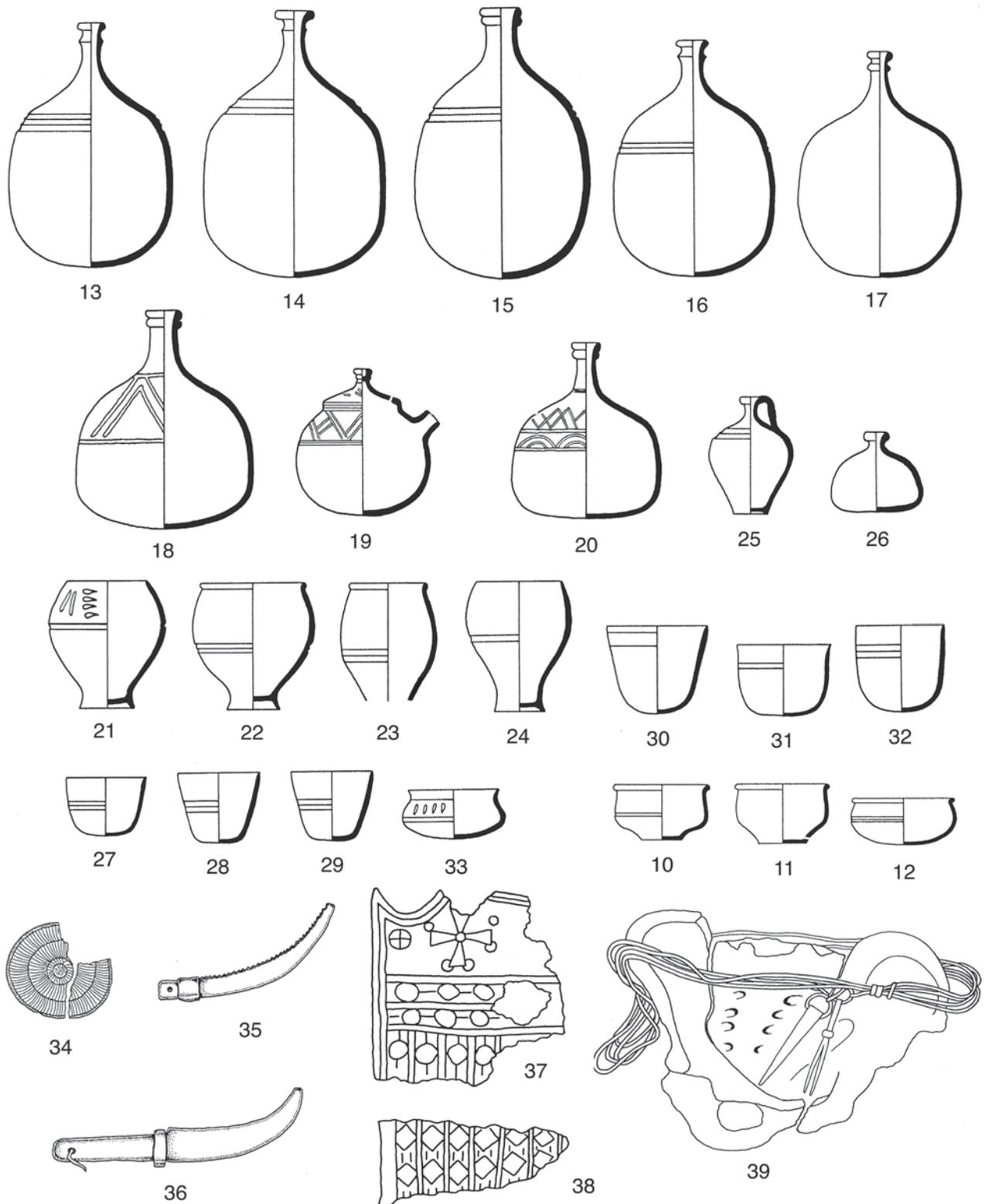


Figure 8. The finds.

more general Islamic burial practices encountered within post-medieval Nubia. While a general association with the Ottoman presence in Lower and Middle Nubia seems likely, their abundance at Adda, rather than in association with known major military garrisons at Ibrim and Sai (if the Hamid-Kuchungi is not linked with the Sai garrison), is

noteworthy. Who within the post-medieval communities of Lower and Middle Nubia were buried in this distinctive way? It is clear that these burials are distinct amongst the many other Islamic burials in the Adda cemeteries. As Millet observed: 'Interspersed among the pagan burials were numerous Muslim graves, mostly very simple, the body being laid out



in the prescribed direction in a shallow trench no more than forty centimeters deep and barely wide enough to contain the corpse' (1963, 156). This is an issue on which oral histories from the Sai area, at least, might still be able to throw some light. Such dating evidence as exists concerning the few such tombs found near the Third Cataract suggests that those are likely to be linked with an (early?) Ottoman presence of some form, probably in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. While we know little of Adda during this period, a relatively early occupation of the site is certainly suggested by a letter found there dated AD 1590 (Millet 1964, 11, pl. 7, 22).

### Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Dr Sabine Deschler, of the Archaeological Institute of Basel, for advice relating to the breastplate and Dr Andrew Peacock for sharing his knowledge of Ottoman burial practices.

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