

SUDAN & NUBIA

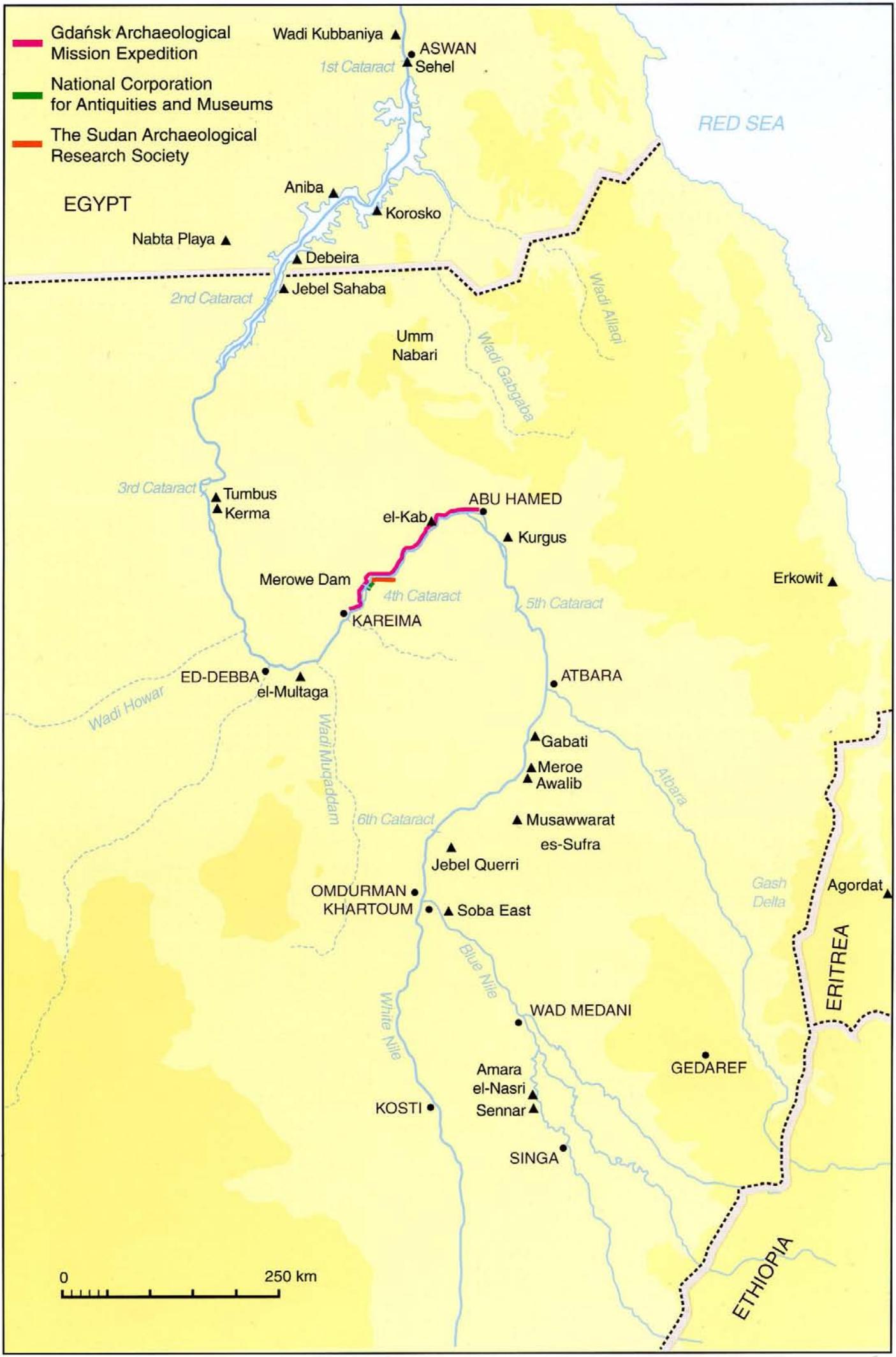
The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



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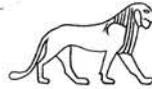
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Contents

Introduction

Vivian Davies

1

Kirwan Memorial Lecture

Forty Years of Archaeological Research
in Sudanese and Egyptian Nubia

Fred Wendorf

2

The Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project

Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project (MDASP)

Salah Mohamed Ahmed

11

Archaeological Survey on the Right Bank of the Nile
between Karima and Abu Hamed: a brief overview

Henryk Paner

15

Old Kush in the Fourth Cataract Region

Elżbieta Kołosowska, Mahmoud el-Tayeb and Henryk Paner

21

The Amri to Kirbekan Survey: the 2002-2003 Season

Derek A. Welsby

26

Survey and Excavation at el-Multaga, a Resettlement
Area related to the Construction of the Merowe
Dam: preliminary results

Francis Geus and Yves Lecoq

33

Reports

The Egyptian Conquest and Administration of Nubia
during the New Kingdom: the testimony of the
Sehel rock-inscriptions

Annie Gasse and Vincent Rondot

40

Pharaonic Inscriptions along the Eastern Desert
Routes in Sudan

Alfredo and Angelo Castiglioni

47

Kush in Egypt: a new historical inscription

Vivian Davies

52

Kurgus 2002: the inscriptions and rock-drawings

Vivian Davies

55

Kurgus 2002: report on the archaeological work

Isabella Welsby Sjöström

58

Erkowitz, a Neolithic Site in the Red Sea Hills (Sudan):
interim report on the pottery

Ghanim Wabida and Abdelrahim M. Khabir

62

Painted Plaster Murals from Meroe Townsite

Rebecca Bradley

66

New Investigations into the Water Supply at

Musawwarat es-Sufra: results from the 2002 season

Thomas Scheibner

71

The Work of the Gdańsk Archaeological Museum
Expedition in the Sudan

Zbigniew Borowski

81

An Archaeological Exploration of the Blue Nile
in January-February 2000

Victor M. Fernández

85

The Blue Nile Archaeological Salvage Project:

Amara el-Nasri

Abdel Rahman Ali Mohamed

91

Miscellaneous

List of Archaeological Mission Activities in Sudan
between 1934 and 1984

Salah Omer Elsadig

98

Front Cover: Sehel Island: rock-inscriptions of Viceroys of Kush.

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.



Kurgus 2002: report on the archaeological work

Isabella Welsby Sjöström

During October and November 2002, a third season of epigraphic and archaeological fieldwork was undertaken at Kurgus, funded by SARS and the British Museum (Davies, 1998; 2001; Welsby Sjöström 1998; 2001). The following is a report on the archaeological work.

Kurgus lies on the east bank of the Nile some 40km to the south of Abu Hamed. In geographical terms Kurgus refers to the settlements on both sides of the river as well as a fairly large island, but in archaeological terms Kurgus relates to a medieval fort close to the river on the east bank, several post-Meroitic cemeteries and the Hagr el-Merwa itself.

As planned, we excavated some of the tumuli by the Hagr el-Merwa, while at the same time four new cemeteries to the north and east of the previously recorded cemetery KRG3 were surveyed and recorded (Colour plate XXXIV). These are KRG4, 5, 6 and 8, as well as the tumuli on the hilltops surrounding KRG6, shown on the map (Figure 1).

A survey of the area between the fort and the dig house (KRG7), where there are indistinct signs of walls as well as tumuli and other grave structures, was also undertaken.

Excavations of tumuli at KRG1

Tumuli 1-6 and 9 were chosen for excavation (Figure 2). Tumuli 1 and 2 were located at the foot of the southeast end of the Hagr, built against the bedrock/debris from the rock itself. Tumuli 4, 5, 6 and 9 lay beyond the secondary outcrops of white quartz, also to the southeast of the Hagr. These tumuli were chosen for excavation because a track runs nearby putting them at potential risk of being disturbed, while the tumuli abutting the rock itself potentially could have belonged to important people if the rock was held in special regard at the time the burials were made. The types of superstructure were identified during the 2000 season (Welsby Sjöström 2001, 60-63), but they were not particularly distinct examples. Throughout they were built using the locally available white quartzite rock, with the addition of a few black stones.

Tumulus 1 (Type 5, diameter 5m, height 840mm) was constructed of large blocks of white quartz arranged in a circle, with smaller stones piled on top to form a circular cairn. This was also the method used in the construction of the other tumuli. The grave beneath it contained the much disturbed burial of an adult female (orientation unknown).

Tumulus 2 (Type 2, 4.6 x 4m, height 400-540mm, grave cuts *c.* 300mm), whose form appeared upon cleaning as an indistinct trilobe, overlay the burials of three infants.

Skeleton 1 lay on its left side, legs flexed, head facing north.
Skeleton 2 lay on its right side, legs flexed head facing south.

Skeleton 3 laid on right side, legs flexed, head facing north.

The bodies were laid out in an east-west direction. The cuts were shallow, most likely due to the rocky nature of the subsoil rather than to any ritual custom.

Tumuli 1 and 2 may have been the ones mentioned by Crawford (1953, 60), although he refers to them as lying by the south end of the Hagr and as being undisturbed.

Tumulus 3 (Type 1A, diameter 2.7m, height 420mm, grave cut 50cm deep) overlay the undisturbed burial of an infant lying on its right side, orientated north-south, with the head to the south, facing east, with beads by the neck and wrists.

Tumulus 4 (Type 4A, 3.05 x 2.55m, height 480mm, grave cut 580mm deep) overlay a sub-adult lying on its back, orientated north-south, with the head slightly inclined to the west. Large flat stones had been placed flush with the surface covering the body.

Tumulus 5 (Type 2, 3.82 x 3.08m, 390mm in height, grave cut 510mm deep), overlay the burial of a middle-aged male orientated east-west, in a flexed position, with the head to the west, facing north.

Tumulus 6 (Type 9, diameter 1.12m, height *c.* 150mm) was the smallest of all the grave monuments excavated. It consisted of a small circular feature made up of black stones, which upon excavation turned out to be relatively modern in date, as the stones lay on a layer of windblown sand that postdates the surface on which tumuli 4 and 5 are built. The ring of stones encompassed what appear to be the traces of a hearth, but no sign of a grave cut or body were found. It is, however, interesting to note that if this was a much later hearth, stones of black ferruginous sandstone were used rather than the locally abundant white quartz; something special must have been intended.

Tumulus 9 (Type 4A, 2 x 2.48m, height 480mm, main grave cut 890mm deep, other 560mm). Here the situation was more intriguing; the grave monument overlay two burials, one of an adult that was clearly Islamic in date and therefore not studied in detail; the skeleton, most likely of a female, was cleaned and photographed, but the bones were not removed and the grave was filled in again. The other burial, located under the superstructure that covered the Islamic grave but positioned off centre, was of an infant, not laid out according to Muslim custom and therefore most likely the earlier of the two. The body lay on its back, with both legs flexed upright as if the cut were too small for the body, and was roughly orientated east-west with the head looking upwards. Possibly it was only by chance that the grave monument also covered the child's grave as it was principally associated with the adult burial.

The burials so far excavated at KRG1 are probably Post-

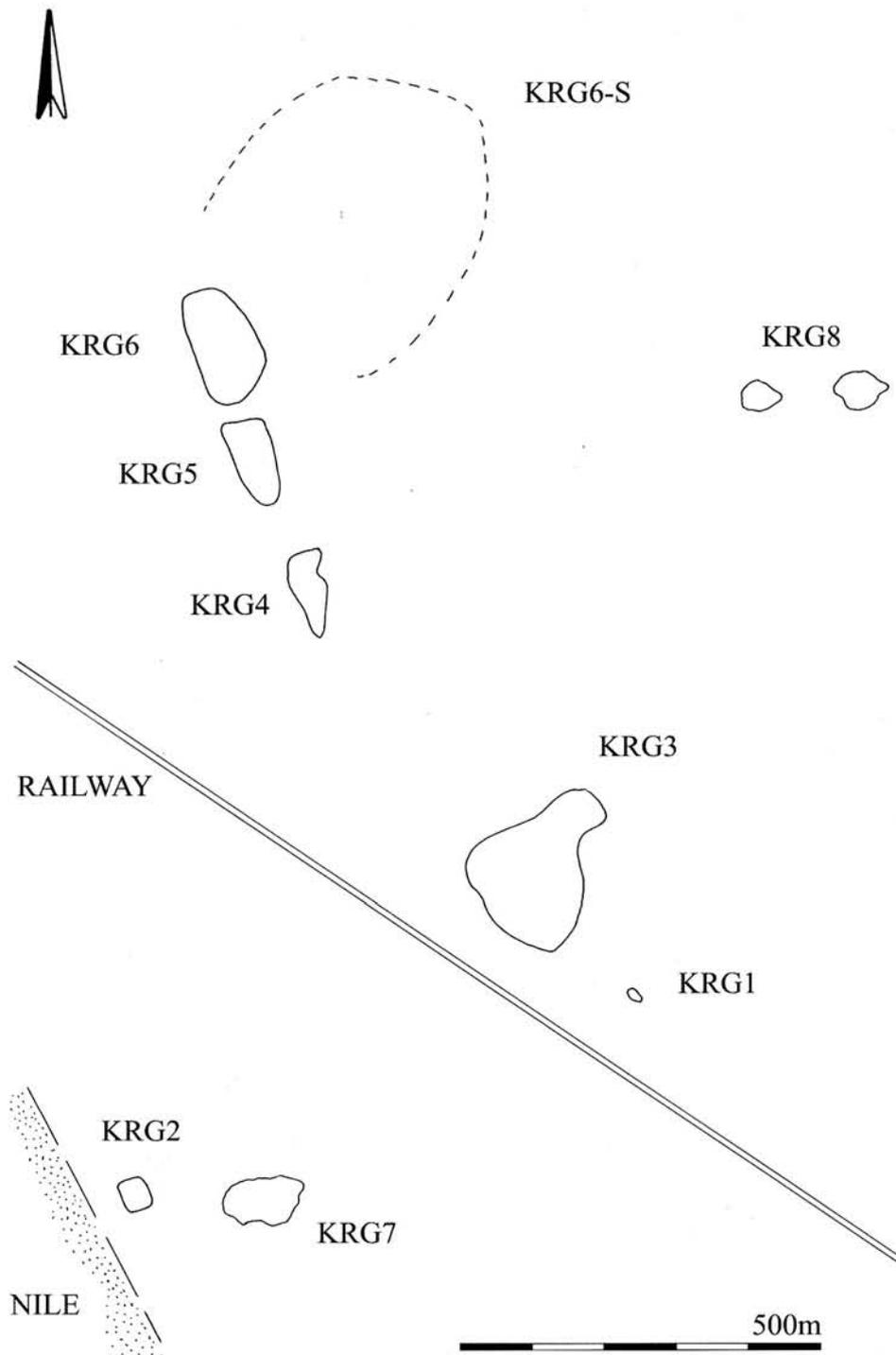


Figure 1. Location of sites.

Meroitic in date, with the exception of the Moslem burial under tumulus 9. There is no suggestion that any are Christian or that they are earlier than the Post-Meroitic period, and the variety of orientation and arrangement of the bodies is in itself a characteristic of burials of this period (Säve-Söderbergh 1982, 7-24). The theory that the tumuli closest to the Hagr might have belonged to persons of importance was impossible to confirm from the finds: only a few beads were found, although Tumulus 1 had been robbed and might

originally have contained grave goods of some value. Without knowing how the society they belonged to was structured it is impossible to say whether the fact that the burials closest to the rock are of infants and an adult female indicates that the location was of little importance.

In addition, two rough dry-stone walls were noted linking the south end of the Hagr with the rock outcrops, suggesting that the area may have been used as a temporary settlement by a perhaps semi-nomadic population in the not too

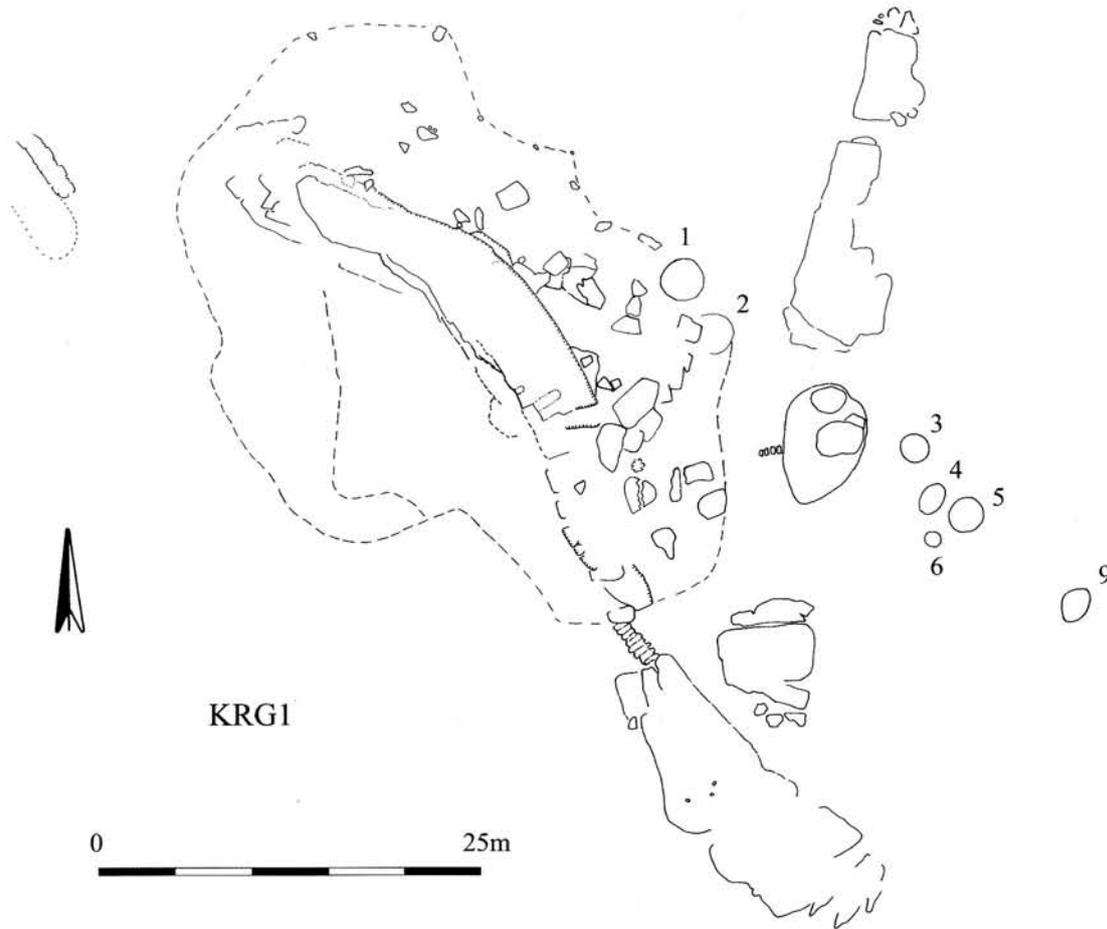


Figure 2. KRG1: Hagar el-Merwa in centre, with excavated tumuli nearby. Dotted line shows area of accumulated wind-blown sand and quartz debris surrounding the Hagar.

distant past – to judge by sherds of late pottery found near the Hagar.

The survey

The tumuli in the ‘new’ cemeteries are of the same type as those at KRG3, with the exception of two new types, Types 10 and 11 (Plate 1) (for descriptions of grave monuments of Types 1-9, see Welsby Sjöström 2001, 60-63). It would therefore seem most likely that the date of the cemeteries is broadly contemporary with that at KRG3. As at KRG3, the material used to build the superstructures is the one most readily available, i.e., black stone is used where black stone occurs in abundance, gravel where there is no stone, blue marble where there are outcrops of blue marble, and so forth (Welsby Sjöström 2001, 60).

Box graves of Christian/Medieval date were found only at KRG4 (five), KRG5 (one) and KRG8 (one). At KRG3 there were also a number of such grave monuments, but much fewer than the other types of grave monuments. This may suggest that in the Christian period the population was smaller than in the Post-Meroitic, although the dating of the other types of tumuli is as yet not clearly understood and such an assumption may be misleading. The presence of cir-

cular tumuli in the field to the east of the medieval fort suggest that they may be of Medieval and/or Post-Medieval date. The almost total absence of grave goods, let alone datable ones, is a problem for us, although what has been found does suggest that the grave monuments are mostly of a pre-Medieval date.

KRG4 Tumuli of Type 1B are the most common; there are five medieval box graves, a scattering of the other types, but



Plate 1. KRG6 tumulus (63) Type 10, and (64) Type 11, in foreground.

none of the newly discovered types of tumuli that occur at KRG5, 6 and 8.

KRG5 Type 1B is the most numerous, closely followed by Type 10; otherwise there are a few or single examples of all the types except for Type 11, which is absent.

KRG6 Type 1B is three times more numerous than Types 2B and 3, which are the second most common types. These are also the two only examples at Kurgus of Type 11. There are no box graves in this cemetery.

KRG6-S These tumuli dot the hilltops to the north-north-west of KRG6. They are not particularly prominent features in the landscape because of their lack of height, but can nonetheless be seen from some distance. Types 1A and B and 2A and B are the most common.

KRG8 This is the smallest of the cemeteries and lies on the low undulating ground to the east of the Hagr el-Merwa, from where it is, however, not visible. There is one box grave, but the predominant types are 1B, 1C and 10B.

Conclusion

There are no available published parallels for the cemeteries at Kurgus in this part of the Nile valley; with the exception of some references by Crawford we have to look further north, such as to the work of the Scandinavian Joint Expedition in the area of the Second Cataract.

Although we may not yet have found all the cemeteries in the Kurgus area, numerous questions now beg to be answered: exactly what date are the cemeteries and where are the settlements that go with them? If they really are mainly Post-Meroitic as seems probable, at least one such settlement most likely lies under the Medieval fort, where post-Meroitic pottery was found in the lowest levels of our trial trench in the south east part of the fort. Other settlements may be hidden under the sand or by the cultivation that has been allowed to stretch further from the river with the aid of modern diesel pumps for irrigation. So far we have found no concrete evidence for any settlement pre-dating the Post-Meroitic period. These are some of the issues that may be addressed at Kurgus during future seasons.

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*Colour plate XXXIV. Kurgus. Aerial view, from the north west, of the Hagr el-Merwa, KRG1
(on the right, beyond the railway, near to the tongue of cultivation), and the cemetery KRG3
(on the left, beyond the railway).*