



Archaeological Survey along the Berber – Suakin Caravan Route: Preliminary Report

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Introduction to the Project

The recent archaeological work in the Meroitic cemeteries at Berber and Dangeil revealed a variety of material including some with different origins (Bashir 2010; 2013). In view of the recovered material from the excavated tombs at Berber, it is important to make a brief note of the significance of Berber's location. The site is situated in the region north of the numerous Meroitic centres in the Island of Meroe, and upstream of the major sites around Napata. It is in a strategic position for trade and can be seen as a crossroads. In the recent history of the Sudan, the city of Berber was one of the main departure points on the Nile for caravans following the road to the Red Sea, and from early Islamic times as a stop on the pilgrimage road to Mecca.

It is probable that in the past the region of Berber played an important role in linking the Nile with the Red Sea. Adams pointed to the possible existence of a trade route connecting the Middle Nile region with the Eastern Desert and the Red Sea by marking a track for that road with a question mark (Adams 1977, 302). This route leaves the Nile from the area around Berber, a location that represents the shortest link in the whole Nile Valley between the river and the Red Sea.

These hypotheses raise important questions that encouraged us to investigate the route from Berber to Suakin. The archaeological survey aimed to locate and document the sites and the features recorded in the reports dating from the Turkiya (AD 1820-1885), those collected by Gleichen in 1905 (Gleichen 1905) and in the narrative poems of Sheikh Ibrahim al-Farash one of the most famous religious poets of the region during the 19th century (al-Farash). However, the main objective was to locate archaeological sites along the route and to identify in particular any evidence for a Kushite presence along the ancient caravan routes.

The Survey

This survey is based on two main sources of information about the targeted area, as noted above. First, military notes and reports dating to the Anglo-Egyptian period describing sites on the route from Suakin to Berber. The second source is a description of the halts along the pilgrim's caravan route from Berber to Suakin in a poem by Sheikh Ibrahim al-Farash when describing his journey to Mecca. Both resources are from the last few centuries, and they serve only to provide guide lines which can be followed in order to have a general idea about the area. In fact, both sources are describing almost exactly the same route and a number of *wadi* names, wells, and mountains are mentioned in both descriptions.

Most of the ancient routes are still in use in Sudan, if little frequented, after the building of railways and asphalt roads. There were a number of main cross-country roads recorded by the Anglo-Egyptian Government in 1905 (Gleichen 1905). The Anglo-Egyptian records included the Korosko–Abu Hamad, Berber–Suakin, Berber–Kassala and Kassala–Massawa routes. The existence of roads from Berber to Suakin and to Kassala clearly indicates connections between Berber and the Middle Nile region with the Red Sea and the Eastern Desert.

The survey was carried out with the use two GPS and two 4 x 4 cars, satellite images and with the help of a local guide to facilitate the work. On the ground a walking survey to record archaeological features was the main methodology, since much of the area is not accessible by car. Sites were documented by completing a description form for each one together with photographs and sketch drawings. The recorded sites were named as BSAS 01, 02 etc. – Berber-Suakin Archaeological Survey.

The survey results

The survey recorded a total of 40 sites along the route starting from Berber and ending at Suakin (Figure 1). The discovered sites belong to different historical periods, and varied in type. These sites are more or less situated near the halting points along the route described in the Anglo-Egyptian reports and by Sheikh Ibrahim al-Farash.

Pilgrims' caravans started, according to oral history testimonies, from what is called locally the pilgrims' city in the old town of Berber (el-Mikhayrif). Here pilgrims hired guides and obtained supplies for the trip across the Eastern Desert. In the recent history of the Sudan, the old town of Berber el-Mikhayrif on the pilgrimage route between the interior of Africa and Mecca was known as one of the main caravan stations. The city contains buildings of mud brick and *jalons* currently standing to about 1m high.

BSAS 01

On the way to the first station along the route we recorded a burial site located east of the Berber to Abu Hamad highway. The site consists of about 23 tumuli of gravel and pebbles located on a gravel plain. The tumuli are about 5m to 9m in diameter and approximately 500mm high. Some of the tombs have been recently looted.

BSAS 02

The first station from Berber is the well called Abu Tagger, or Bir Mahu Bey during the Turkiya. This station is mentioned in both sources. There are seven basins around the well and remains of mud-brick buildings associated with the well dating from the Mahdiya (1885-1898).

BSAS 03

On a high area near Wadi Abu Salm there are scatters of stone and small mounds, which could be burials, and there is a Muslim tomb. There are also some grinding stones and fireplace indicating use of the site as a camping ground.

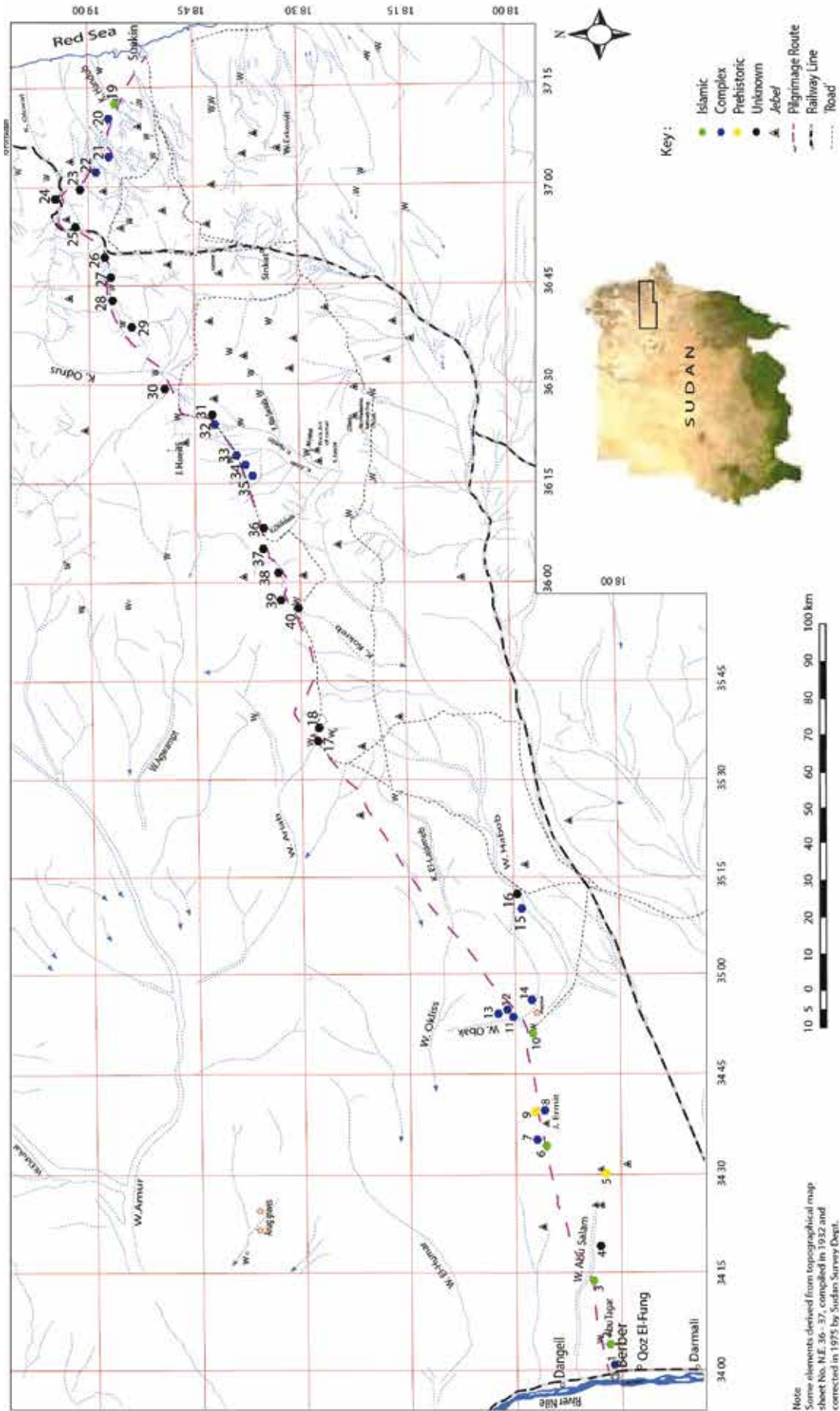


Figure 1. Berber-Snakin Archaeological Project (BS-AP): map showing the recorded sites.



BSAS 04

There is one isolated tumulus of stones located to the west of a large agricultural project, where a number of water reservoirs (*bafair*) have been dug.

BSAS 05

This site is located in the area west and north of Jebel Deata in the Wadi Abu Salm. It is a large prehistoric site consisting of scatters of stone tools; upper and lower grinding stones of granite and quartz, axes and mace heads. Potsherds decorated with dotted lines were also noted across the site. To the north of the *jebel* there are stone tumuli and dense concentrations of stone artifacts and fragments suggesting the location of a stone tools' workshop.

On the top of the *jebel* there is a shelter, its walls covered in rock art showing humans, animals such as camels and donkeys and some images of camels with riders (Plate 1).



Plate 1. Rock art from site BSAS 05.

BSAS 06

Um Atfu is the second station along the caravan route. It is a rock shelter of granite making it a good place for camping. There is scatter of granite boulders in the area and rock art, one of which depicting animals was recorded.

BSAS 07

To the north of the Um Atfu shelter on a high rocky area is a concentration of tombs consisted of about nine stone tumuli, circular in shape and 2.8m to 3m in diameter. There is one large isolated mound to the south. No finds were observed on the surface.

BSAS 08

This site is located in the Jebel Erimit area, where intensive modern gold mining is taking place. North east of Jebel Erimit on a high area is a concentration of about 18 mound graves, covered by small quartz stones and pebbles, with diameters between 1m and 3.5m, and standing 200-300mm high.

BSAS 09

North of Jebel Erimit on a raised area in the middle of a sandy plain is a scatter of fragments from upper and lower grinding stones and lithic material of quartz. Here there is a

large prehistoric site partially covered by sand accumulation.

BSAS 10

In the Middle of Wadi el-Back or Oback is an old well noted by Sheikh Ibrahim al-Farash and also described in the Anglo-Egyptian reports as one of the caravan stations along the route from Berber to Suakin.

BSAS 11

To the north east of el-Back well on the high area east of the *wadi* is a large tumuli field consisting of many tombs covered by pieces of granite. The tombs varied in size, from 1m to 5m in diameter, and 200mm to 900mm high. Some are connected to each other; in one place, five were attached.

BSAS 12

This site is one of the most important of those recorded; it is located in the area of el-Back east of BSAS 11. It is a large cemetery consisting of large and high mounds of stone within a stone-framed enclosure of about 30 x 40m. The superstructures are circular in shape and well-built with a ring of large stones filled in the middle by small stones and pebbles (Plate 2). Some have been recently plundered and looters have left potsherds and bone fragments on the surface. In one tomb we found a faience amulet of the god Bes (Plate 3).

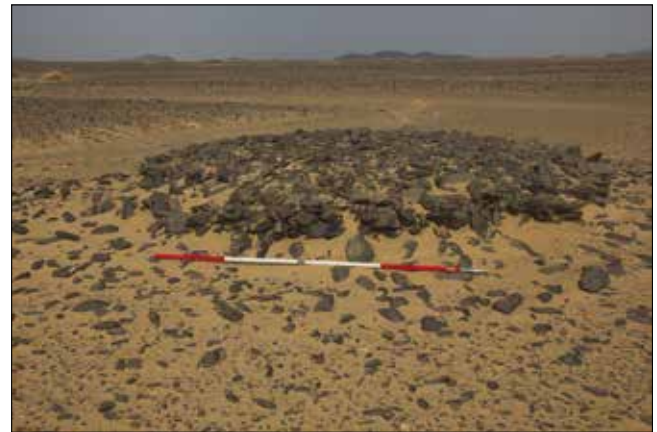


Plate 2. Circular-shaped tumulus from site BSAS 12.

BSAS 13

A tumuli field containing more than 15 tombs near a Muslim cemetery. The site is located east of Wadi el-Back.

BSAS 14

This is an important and large site. It is located on a hill to the far to the east of Wadi el-Back in Alhoraba area. There is a dense concentration of tumuli around and on the hill. Some potsherds and fragments of a small faience vessel were found close to a number of disturbed tombs, including part of a small animal figurine of faience and beads. There are about 35 tombs which varied in shape and type of superstructures. There are rounded flat tombs measuring 1m to 10m in diameter, and tall tombs, about 1.5m high. On one stone built into a tomb superstructure, we found rock art showing cows with long horns.



Plate 3. Faience amulet of the god Bes from site BSAS 12.

To the east of the hill on a plain there are scatters of fragments of upper and lower grinding stones, potsherds, stone tools and a tethering stone indicating the presence of a settlement area or camping place (Plate 4). A number of Muslim tombs are found in this area. The finds from this site are dated from the prehistoric period to the Kushite and to the Islamic period.



Plate 4. Tethering stone from site BSAS 14.

BSAS 15

This site is located on a high area west of Wadi Hobub. It consisted of a scatter of different tumuli types. Some are flat and circular in shape with stone rings 2m to 10m in diameter (Plate 5). Others are dome shaped, 1.2m high.

BSAS 16

In Wadi Hobub there is a scatter of stone tumuli over a rocky area between two branches of the *wadi*. There are different types of tumuli of varying sizes.

Plate 6. A fish-tail tomb at site BSAS 17.

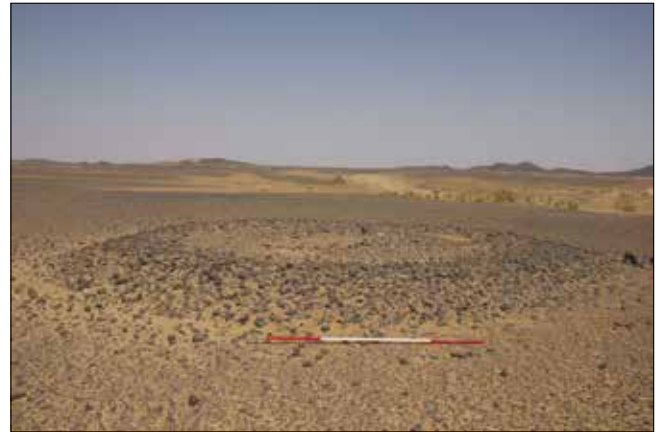


Plate 5. Circular tumulus from site BSAS 15.

BSAS 17

Wadi Hobub leads to the Ariab area, which is one of the main stations along the caravan route and was considered to be the half way point between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea. Part of the area was investigated earlier and sites dated to around the 4th to the 6th century AD were found (Reinold and S. M. Ahmed 2003-2008, 67). It is a well-known water source with several wells. This area is mentioned in the Anglo-Egyptian reports describing the route. There is a large modern village near the gold mining company camps and the mining areas.

In the Ariab area south of the village on a high area is a scatter of tombs of different types dating to different periods. There are Islamic tombs and tumuli along the edge of the high areas. A remarkable feature in this area is the presence of what look like fish-tail tombs, a tomb type present in the hinterland of the Red Sea and dated to the pre-Islamic period (Hinkel 1992, 76) (Plate 6).

BSAS 18

The road from Ariab passes through Wadi Mogut and along this *wadi* there are scatters of different types of tumuli and Muslim tombs. The tumuli have a circular stone ring infilled by small stones.





The route then enters Wadi Kokreb, where water is available at a number of wells. Kokreb is one of the major stations in al-Farash's description of the route to Suakin. It is also mentioned in the Anglo-Egyptian reports. Now it is occupied by a water station and a police office.

From Kokreb the survey team went directly to the main highway in Haya and continued to Suakin in order to obtain supplies. This move was a result of the different accounts we heard from the local people describing the long way and difficulties we would face along the route from Kokreb to Suakin. Therefore, we went to Suakin and continued our survey from the other direction.

BSAS 19

The first stop from Suakin is Wadi Handoub, one of the stops described by al-Farash and also mentioned in the Anglo-Egyptian reports. There is a well in the middle of a plain surrounded by hills. On the hill north west of the well are ruins of a fort built of stones bonded with lime mortar (Plate 7). There are the remains of a circular tower in its north-eastern part. The hill has a 'U'-shape and there is a scatter of round-shaped tumuli down the hill in the plain enclosed by the hill (Plate 8).



Plate 7. Ruins of a fort in Wadi Handoub, site BSAS 19.



Plate 8. Tumuli field in Wadi Handoub, site BSAS 19.

BSAS 20

This site is located at the foot of a hill to the north of

Handoub. It is a scatter of stone tumuli each measuring 2m to 8m in diameter and about 200mm to 600mm high. There are also Muslim tombs nearby.

BSAS 21

This is an important site. It is located in Wadi Otow to the north of Handoub and on top of hills in the middle of the *wadi*. The site consists of a scatter of stone structures along the hill. It is a large fort comprising several buildings. Some walls are standing to six courses of stones, about 1.5m high (Plate 9). There also is a scatter of towers on the surrounding hill indicating that this area was tightly controlled.



Plate 9. Ruins of large fort in Wadi Otow, site BSAS 21.

There is a scatter of fire places and fragments of glass indicating the use of this area by the British. The oral testimonies by the local people mentioned that these forts were built by the British to resist Osman Digna's military movements. In the *wadi* there are remains of the railway, an abortive attempt by the Anglo-Egyptian forces based on the coast to construct a line from Suakin to Berber in 1885, which was abandoned after having only been laid for a total of about 32km (Hill 1937).

The site also contains Muslim tombs and a scatter of stone tumuli measuring 5m in diameter and about 1m high.

BSAS 22

This site is located to the west of the Tmbok area. It is a large site consisting of a scatter of tumuli of different sizes and types. There are rounded tumuli of small stones measuring 2m to 6m in diameter and about 300mm to 500mm high located on the banks of the small *wadi* together with number of Muslim tombs.

The site extended to the west where there is a scatter of larger tumuli rounded and oval in shape, measuring 10m to 15m in diameter and about 300mm to 1.7m high. In this site evidence for gold mining activities was found.

BSAS 23

This site is located at the foot of a hill facing Wadi Tmbok. It consisted of a few tumuli and small stone structures used by the locals to protect new-born animals, such as sheep and goats.

BSAS 24

This site is located in Wadi Aswd to the west of the railway station at Abo on the Port Sudan to Atbara line. It is a scatter of about five tumuli, which measure 2m to 8m in diameter and 200mm to 500mm high.

BSAS 25

This site is located to the south of Komosan railway station. It is a scatter of well-built tumuli, rounded in shape.

BSAS 26

In the area of Wadi Odros is a scatter of rectangular platform tombs of stones measuring 8 x 6.5m and about 500mm to 900mm high (Plate 10). There are also rounded stone tumuli.



Plate 10. Rectangular platform tombs of stone, site BSAS 26.

BSAS 27

This site is a scatter of rounded tumuli with some of the large stones around the southern and the northern sides set as orthostats. The tumuli measure 2m to 6m in diameter and 200mm to 600mm high. Nearby is a Muslim cemetery.

BSAS 28

This site is a scatter of rounded tumuli of small stones with some large stones on the eastern side set vertically. The tumuli measure 3m to 6m in diameter and are 200mm to 500mm high.

BSAS 29

Located near Toblab village is one tumulus 6m in diameter and about 1m high found on a high area. Toblal or Toblab is a small village of the Beja, which has a small school. This place is known as a market for the goods coming from Berber. It was mentioned by al-Farash as an important stop for caravans coming from Berber.

BSAS 30

Wadi Heritili was one of the important stopping points for caravans as it had a source of good water from a shallow

well in Tamai, only 2m deep, and there are also other water sources there. In this area there is a number of *wadis* like Adoros and it is the most difficult part of the route for cars to cross, because the *wadi* is full of small rocks.

The site is a scatter of tumuli on a high area and on the banks of small *wadis*. They measure 2m to 7m in diameter and 200mm to 800mm high. Some tumuli have a ring of large stones.

BSAS 31

This site is located in the area at the confluence of Wadi Satem and Wadi Heritili. There is a scatter of tumuli along the left bank of Wadi Heritili measuring 2m to 6m in diameter, and about 400mm to 600mm high. Toward Wadi Satem there is a scatter of lithic materials and potsherds.

BSAS 32

This site contains different types of tombs, among them Muslim tombs with tombstones, some inscribed in Arabic. There are square platform tombs 8 x 7m in size and about 500mm to 1.3m high with rounded corners. There is also a scatter of tumuli of different shapes and sizes on the hill.

BSAS 33

This site is a scatter of tumuli along a ridge on the west bank of Khor Mahreeb, the monuments measuring 2m to 7m in diameter and about 200mm to 500mm high. In this area we noticed sand accumulation from desertification in some cases covering parts of the tumuli.

BSAS 34

This site is located to the west of Wadi Habab. There are Muslim tombs and also a scatter of tumuli measuring 3m to 6m in diameter and about 400mm to 600mm high. The superstructures are of small stones.

BSAS 35

This site is located on a high area of quartz. It consists of a scatter of different types of tumuli built from fragments of quartz, the monuments measuring 1m to 6m in diameter. There is a stone ring around each tomb consisting of large black stones, some concentrated on their eastern side.

BSAS 36

This site is a scatter of circular and semi-circular tumuli on a rocky area at the foot of a hill. They measure 1.5m to 7m in diameter and are about 200mm to 900mm high.

BSAS 37

This site is located in Igalat area to the east of Kokreb. It is a scatter of tumuli; some are circular measuring 2.5m to 3m in diameter and about 500mm high and one is square.



BSAS 38

This site is a settlement or the camping place used during the Mahdiya and noted by the British in their description of this route. There also is a scatter of tumuli and Muslims tombs on the surrounding hills in the Kokreb area.

BSAS 39

Tumuli field located on the chain of hills facing Wadi Kokreb. It is semi-circular in shape. Also a number of Muslim tombs are found in this area.

BSAS 40

This site is located on a rocky area to the east of Kokreb water station. It consisted of a concentration of tumuli, semi-circular in shape measuring 3m to 9m in diameter and about 200mm to 1m high (Plate 11).



Plate 11. Tumuli in Wadi Kokreb, site BSAS 40.

Discussion

This survey team attempted to cross from the Nile to the Red Sea using ancient routes, following those *nadis* and passing those water sources utilised by caravans in the past. This work provided clear proof for the existence of an accessible passage through the Red Sea Hills, which was used by traders and pilgrims. The passage toward Heritili seems to be one of the main routes through the Red Sea Hills and animal tracks of donkeys or camels are well-preserved. This passage has been recorded in Carcereri's description of the route (Carcereri 1876).

There are similarities in the description of the route and the stopping points with their water sources mentioned in all of the literature that was used to provide a framework for this survey. The route and the place names in the description of the journey from Suakin to Berber by the members of the Catholic mission to central Africa in 1876 (Carcereri 1876) are still known and we were able to find all of these places. It seems that this route was in use intensively in the recent past from the Turkiya through to the Anglo-Egyptian period.

In this preliminary inspection of the Berber-Suakin route, described in our main literary sources, an attempt was made to record the archaeological features along it. Among the

archaeological sites recorded by us the majority are cemeteries. These sites are diverse, ranging from large cemeteries to an isolated mound grave. The tombs are located along the edges and ridges of the hills or following the banks of *nadis*. Mound graves are the most common tomb types observed. The tradition of burying the deceased under a mound of stone or gravel was the main funerary practice in ancient Sudan during many different periods. Mound graves similar to those well-known along the Nile and in the cataract areas are scattered along the way from Berber to Suakin.

A number of the sites discovered in this survey have been selected for further studies in the near future, which will include detailed site surveys and test excavations. The future work, of intensive investigation and comparative studies, will examine if there was a Kushite presence along this route and if so what was the nature of that presence. Although concrete evidence is at present lacking we believe that this route was in use much earlier than the early Islamic period when it functioned as a pilgrimage route.

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