

Medieval Settlement 3-J-19

Terrain

The settlement at site 3-J-19 was situated on the eastern side of Mis Island in a shallow depression to the north of the hill on which cemetery site 3-J-20 was located. The north-western extremity of the site was 50m east of the church and cemetery at site 3-J-18. The natural terrain in the area was composed of compacted silt/sand with outcrops of bedrock.

Site description

The settlement occupied an area approximately 130 × 130m (Welsby 2003, 13-14). It has been heavily eroded, the surface consisted of angular rocks strewn across the whole settlement area. Most of the rocks were set within and on a loose silt/sand matrix, the overburden/collapse deposit. In several places the site had fewer rocks on its surface, where small shallow depressions signified the interiors of buildings or rooms. In a few cases the rocks were *in situ*, still being part of preserved structures underlying the overburden layer. The surface of the site was extensively littered with potsherds of medieval date.



Plate 1. General view of site prior to excavation. Looking south towards the hill occupied by the cemetery, site 3-J-20.

Excavation involved the removal of the silt/sand overburden and all of the stones not structurally articulated. The location chosen for excavation was an area between the extant remains of circular, stone structures in the centre of the site and structures built against the hill delimiting it to the south. As such, a moderately sized area was investigated in order to obtain an impression of the character of the settlement. This area measured 30m north-south by 20m east-west, approximately 350m².

The Archaeology

Within the excavation area the most complete remains were present towards the northern end. These were the structures F1, F2 and F3. Each of these had been built using sub-rectangular stones none of which had been worked, averaging 400 × 250 × 250mm in size, with some up to 700mm in length, as well as many smaller

stones. The three structures were set on the eroded bedrock rather than the silt/sand layer which overlay the bedrock in many places.

The most northerly of these features, F1, was built against the north-western side of F2. It comprised short lengths of wall forming its north-eastern and south-western sides, its north-western side formed of a raised band of bedrock. The two short lengths of wall were each roughly 1.5m long and 500mm wide. The northerly wall was the better preserved, it was formed of stones laid neatly as headers and survived to two courses (300mm) in height. The surviving height of the two walls did not exceed that of the bedrock component of the structure. No structural remains built over this bedrock component were present, F1 was thus preserved to only a very limited elevation. The area enclosed by the walls was sub-square in shape measuring 3m north east - south west by 2.5m north west - south east, with the entrance on the southern side.

Abutted by F1 was F2, itself built against the northern side of F3. The western and northern sides of F2 were comprised of a curved stone wall a little over 4m long with a width averaging 750mm and a height of 300mm. The stones making up the wall were laid in a rather haphazard manner in a single course, perhaps designed as a foundation layer. The east side of the structure comprised a raised band of bedrock. The overall structure was sub-circular with an internal space measuring 2.6m north-south by 2m east-west entered through its north-eastern side.

Structure F3 was of similar form to F2, a wall enclosing a circular area with an entrance on its north side. The wall, survived to a maximum height of 300mm, was 400mm wide at its southern extent and 1.2m wide at its northern end. As in F2, the stones used in its construction were laid in a haphazard manner in a single course, again perhaps to form a foundation layer. The sub-circular area enclosed by the wall/foundations had an average diameter of 3m.

The fills within these three structures had no discernible differences to the overburden layers found throughout the site. They were composed of loose, wind-blown sand/silts and had no layers or surfaces present within them. As such, only the walls of the structures gave an indication



Plate 2. Structure F3 with structures F2 and F1 beyond, looking north east.

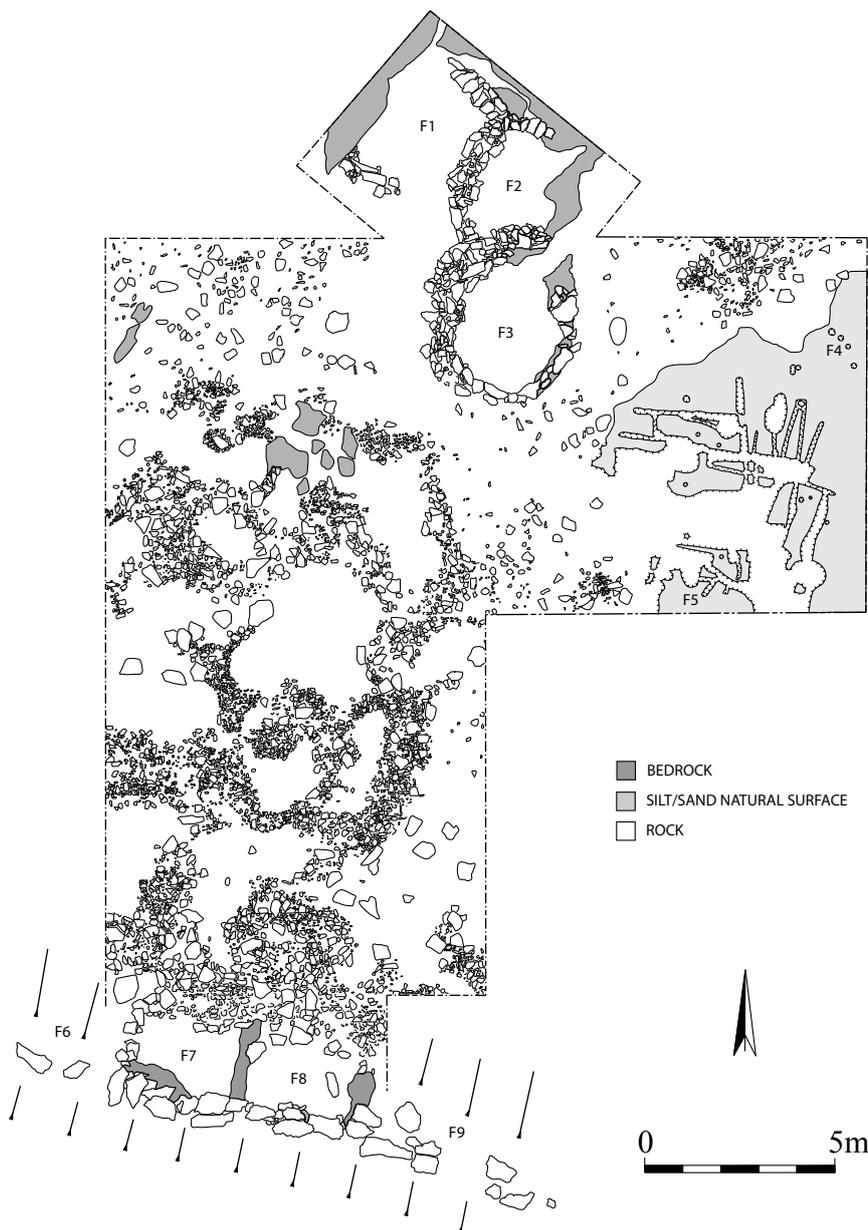


Figure 1. Plan of the excavated area (scale 1:200).

as to their character. The most conspicuous feature of the three structures was their sub-circular and sub-rectangular shapes. The irregularity of their plans suggests that these were not the foundations of mud-brick structures but were the lower courses/foundations of walls constructed of stones. Occurrences of round and irregularly shaped stone buildings constructed in clusters have been recorded in moderate density in the Fourth Cataract region. Many of these were presumably crude huts sometimes with associated enclosures (cf site 4-L-41).

The archaeological remains in the eastern part of the excavation area were of a different nature to the aforementioned stone structures. This area of the excavation differed from the other parts in that its silt/sand alluvial layer was still present rather than its having been removed/disturbed by the construction of stone buildings upon it. The archaeological remains in this portion of the site were all negative in form, they had been cut into the naturally formed surface of the silt/sand alluvial layer.

The majority of these archaeological features were of linear shape, their form being reminiscent of small channels. Within the context of the site's topography it is difficult to understand what function these served. The channels may have been post-trenches associated with the construction of small fences. These linear features averaged 150mm wide and 50mm deep, and ranged in length; most were between 600mm and 1.6m. The channels were in parallel lines orientated both north-south and east-west with right angle intersections occurring in several instances. From the arrangement of the linear features the plans of individual structures could not be discerned. If the features were associated with fences, the formation of multiple parallel lines may be the result of those fences being temporary in nature being shifted many times. However, the channels/post-trenches do not cut one into another. Much of the deposit into which these were cut has not survived and, given the limited evidence available, it is hazardous to attempt to assign a function to them. Did they delimit enclosures formed of small sections of fence associated with livestock or for the storage of foodstuffs?

Across the eastern part of the excavation area where the natural silt/sand alluvial layer was preserved were 14 post-holes, amongst and close to the linear channels. These ranged in size from 60mm diameter and 40mm deep to 180mm diameter and 70mm deep. Most in the vicinities of the linear features were isolated examples, forming coherent patterns with other post-holes. If this area of the site was associated with animal pens, the posts or stakes that the holes contained may have been to support rudimentary roofs over them. Situated along the eastern edge of the excavation area was the only clear grouping of post-holes, F4. This consisted of four post-holes on average 140mm diameter arranged in an arc 1.2m in length. It is debatable if these post-holes were part of a round building or simply part of a curved length of fence. The small diameter of the posts they would have contained and the lack of other associated post-holes would seem to support the latter interpretation.

The alluvial deposit present along the southern edge of the eastern part of the excavation was baked by fire. This area (F5) of silt/sand had several linear features cut into it; it had been truncated/eroded to such an extent that it did not join the main body of exposed alluvial deposit.



Plate 3. Eastern area of excavation, linear features cut into the silt/sand alluvial deposit. Looking north east.

The baking occurred across the surface of this area of alluvium bore no relation to the features also cut into it. No structural features or burnt deposits were associated with the baking and the baking was of an 'ephemeral' character. The baking may thus have been the result of a single fire event rather than being associated with any long term processes.

The southern end of the excavation was occupied by a single line of conjoined rectangular structures built upon the side of the hill that flanked the southern limit of the settlement. The structures, F6-9, had all been constructed against the northern side of a substantial stone 'boundary' wall.¹ This wall was aligned east-west and was constructed of large sub-angular boulders averaging 900 × 400 × 400mm in size. It was generally a single rock wide and of a single course and was 14.7m long, an average width of 700mm and an average height of 500mm. The most westerly of the four structures, F6, was only partially revealed, its western side lying outside the excavations. As such, its original dimensions (if indeed it was an enclosed structure) could only be estimated. East-west it may have measured 2m, although this could have been larger, north-south it was in the region of 1.5m.

Better preserved was structure F7 which abutted F6, the party wall between constructed from sub-rectangular stones averaging 300 × 300 × 200mm in size laid in a rudimentary fashion. This north-south wall was 2m in length, 400mm wide and 300mm high. The eastern 'wall' of F7 was composed of a ridge of bedrock which had been utilised as a base for additional courses of stone. This ridge had been formed by the removal of the soft, degraded bedrock either side of it, in order to produce level and horizontal floors in F7 and F8. The northern limits of F7 and F8 were represented by the remains of a stone wall with only its southern face preserved. The internal size of structure F7 was 1.75m north-south by 2.5m east-west.

Of comparable form to F7 was structure F8, which adjoined its eastern side. Both side 'walls' were formed by a ridge of bedrock onto which large rocks had been placed. The internal dimensions of the structure were 1.75m north-south and 2.55m east-west. Adjoining the eastern side of this structure was F9 which lay almost totally

outside the excavation area; its extent was not evident. It is assumed that an enclosed structure was present in this place, however, the 4m length of the 'boundary' wall would have provided sufficient space for two enclosures to be built against it.

In common with the circular and sub-rectangular structures F1-3, the F6-9 structures did not contain stratified deposits which might have provided evidence to suggest their function. The fills they contained were loose wind-blown sand/silts. The form of the F6-9 structures differed from that of F1-3. They were rectangular in shape, arranged in a single line and constructed on the side of the hill bounding the settlement. A possibility thus exists that they had a different function. Their position on the fringe of the site as well as their form is reminiscent of the animal pens present in the modern villages in the Fourth Cataract region. Their association with livestock would thus seem to be the likeliest function for these structures.

The large excavated area between the F1-3 and F6-9 structures did not contain any wholly convincing structural remains. After removal of the unstratified build-up



Plate 4. The substantial rock wall with structure F8 in the foreground and F7 behind, looking south west.

deposits, the area was seen to consist of discrete spreads of rocks deposited in variable density with discrete spaces where no rocks were present. The character of the area was suggestive of its once having contained structures of similar form to F1-3. However, the discrete rock spreads were too poorly defined to allow for positive identifications of individual structures. They were composed of angular and sub-rectangular stones ranging from 50-300mm in size. There was no coherent placement of individual stones, the stone spreads had a 'rolled' character implying they were either very disturbed foundations or were demolition/collapse deposits from adjacent structures. The relatively high proportion of smaller stones as opposed to large stones within this area of the site suggests that the buildings it may once have contained had their larger stones robbed and reused.

Small finds etc. from the settlement

Context 1000
bone SF 6096
Context 1001

¹ Feature (13) on the plan see Welsby 2003, fig. 2.9.

bone SF 6098; fired clay SF 2576

Context 1002

bone SF 6095, 6097, 6094; spindle whorl SF 2205

Context 2000

beads SF 2577, 2582, 2236, 2575

Context 2004

ostrich eggshell SF 2580

Context 2023

bead SF 2238

Context 2025

bead SF 2578; stone SF 2579; cowrie shell SF 2581