

SUDAN & NUBIA

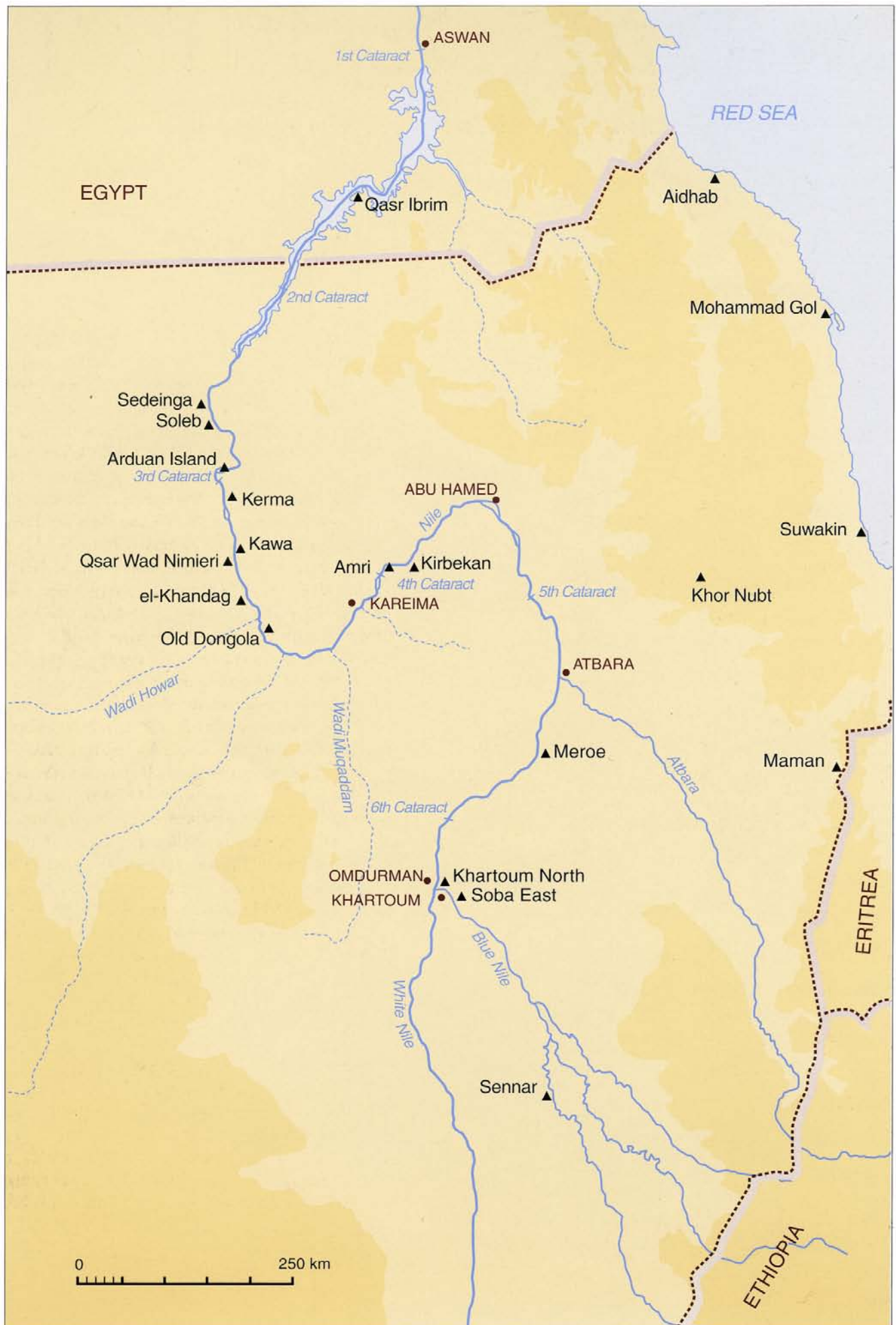
The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Bulletin No. 4

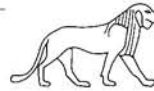
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Front Cover: Meroe. Pyramid BEG N 18 (type XII) before restoration work on the chapel. In the background pyramid BEG N 9 (type VII). Photo taken by F. W. Hinkel in 1980 from the top of BEG N 19 (slide 5467).

Introduction

Vivian Davies

During the last winter the Society resumed its flagship project at Kawa, among other things uncovering more of the early Kushite town, including an extraordinary mud-brick building once decorated with wall-paintings showing royal and divine figures and containing the remains of large ceramic figures of the gods Bes and Beset (see Welsby below). We also responded to the international appeal for help from the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums to document sites threatened by the planned Merowe Dam, carrying out a survey on the left bank of the Nile and on the islands between Amri and Kirkeban above the Fourth Cataract which identified well over a hundred sites of different types and periods (Welsby). Qasr Ibrim, for many years under excavation by the Egypt Exploration Society and still yielding information of first-rate importance (Rose), embodies an acute reminder of the destructive consequences of dams and of the loss to knowledge that such schemes entail.

The need for rescue-work in response to various threats (environmental as well as man-made) is a thread running through much of this issue, which also includes reports on the study and conservation of the monuments at Meroe (Hinkel), excavation necessitated by road-building at Soba East (Abdel Rahman Ali Mohamed), archaeological survey in the little-known Fifth Cataract region (Youssef El-Amin and Edwards), and continuing investigation of the Mahas region at the Third Cataract (Edwards and Ali Osman), the latter an interdisciplinary project which now valuably incorporates ecological, ethnographic and linguistic components (Muhammad Jalal Hashim and Bell). We are also very pleased to include two papers on aspects of Islamic archaeology in the Sudan (Intisar Soghayroun el-Zein and Salah Omer Elsadig), hitherto a chronically neglected subject but clearly one with great potential for further research.

It is an enormous pleasure to report that Professor William Y. Adams, one of the great names of modern Sudanese archaeology, has accepted our invitation to become Honorary President of SARS, in succession to the late Sir Laurence Kirwan. Professor Adams takes office in time to preside over our tenth anniversary in 2001, a year in which SARS celebrates a decade of progressive achievement and looks forward to the formidable but exciting challenges that lie ahead.

Rescue Excavations at Soba East

Abdel Rahman Ali Mohamed

Introduction¹

Recent years have witnessed serious dangers to the archaeological heritage in the Republic of the Sudan, due to the establishment of many development projects, mainly roads, dams, agricultural extensions and other land modifications. As many of these projects were not accompanied by archaeological investigations, a lot of valuable information on important sites has been lost. In response to this the Fieldwork Section of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM), with the kind help of many international archaeological missions, is playing an important role, with very limited resources, to rescue the endangered cultural heritage all over the country.

The construction of the el-Gereif East - Eilaoun Road, which passes through the north-eastern part of the site of Soba East² (Welsby 1998, fig. 2), has caused considerable damage to the site.

A limited rescue operation was launched in 1992 by the members of NCAM³ on the southern part of the area east of kom (UA), which has been leveled by bulldozers to a depth of about 1m. The original diameter of the kom was 32m and it had a height of 350mm above the surrounding plain.

The area immediately to the east of kom (UA) was partially excavated in 1989-90 by the Archaeological Mission of the British Institute in Eastern Africa. The excavation exposed a red-brick vaulted tomb containing 16 adult skeletons and one skeleton of an unborn baby and several later burials outside and partly over the tomb (Welsby 1998, 55). A further 400m² has been excavated by NCAM within which ten graves were recorded (Figs 1 and 3).

Description of the burials

The Vaulted Tomb(UA3)58

The tomb lies just to the south and adjacent to the tomb (UA3)36 excavated by the BIEA. It is a rectangular structure having external dimension of 3.12 x 2.40m, the long axis oriented east-west with the entrance to the west (Fig. 2). Leading to the entrance was a descender 700mm deep, and measuring 1.8 x 1.6m. The descender has an irregular shape at the western side and the northern side is delimited by a mud-brick wall 380mm wide and surviving to a height of

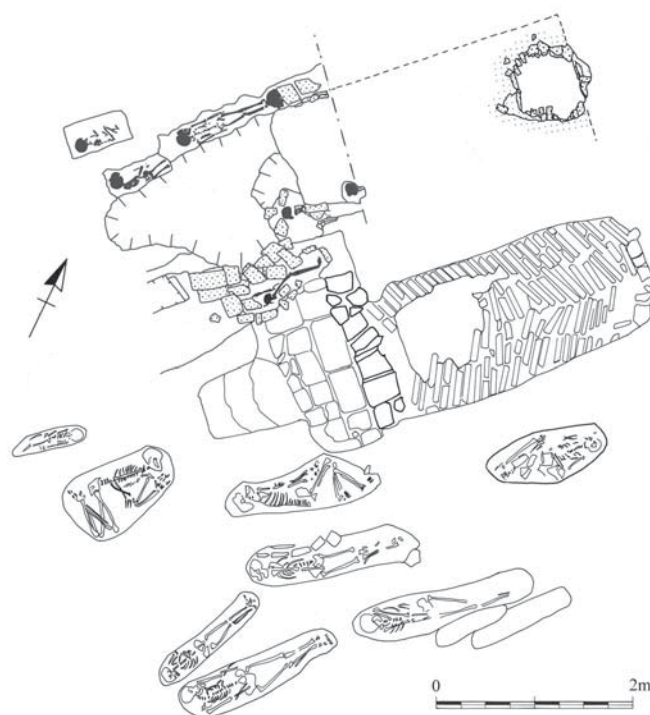


Figure 1. The red brick tombs and later cemetery.

800mm deep which served to separate the areas in front of the two tombs. The internal length of the vault is 3m. The floor of the vaulted chamber is paved with red bricks covered with mud mortar which is the bonding material throughout the construction of the tomb. The entrance is closed by a sandstone block 420 x 200 x 70mm in size and mud bricks and is plastered with mud mortar (Plate 1). The collapsed upper part of the vault may be due to the impact of heavy vehicles. In the middle of the vault a compact concentration of human bones was found. Rain water had entered the tomb through the upper opening making the identification of the burials inside the tomb a difficult task. However, a single adult contracted female, oriented north-south with the head to the north, was recovered. This seems to be a secondary burial. For many reasons the excavation of this tomb has not yet been completed.

Grave (UA3)59

A grave of a small child 3-4 years old. Dorsally extended, oriented east-west with the head to the east. The head is elevated on a ledge cut in the compact silt and cobble subsoil. The hands were laid on the pelvis. The burial lies 70mm below the present ground level.

Grave (UA3)60

A semi-contracted adult female 25-30 years old, oriented east-west with the head to the east facing north west (Plate 2). The head is supported on a red brick. The right hand is folded under the skull, while the left hand lies parallel to the chest and is folded over the pelvis. The grave was sealed by fragments of red bricks.

Contents: two copper-alloy ear rings.

¹ This paper was presented at the Ninth International Nubian Studies Conference (August 21-26, 1998. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

² Soba East, the Capital of Alwa, lies on the right bank of the Blue Nile 22km upstream from its confluence with the White Nile at Khartoum. It covers 2.75km².

³ The excavation was supervised by the late Prof. Ahmed M. A. El Hakim, and directed by Dr. Salah Mohamed Ahmed.

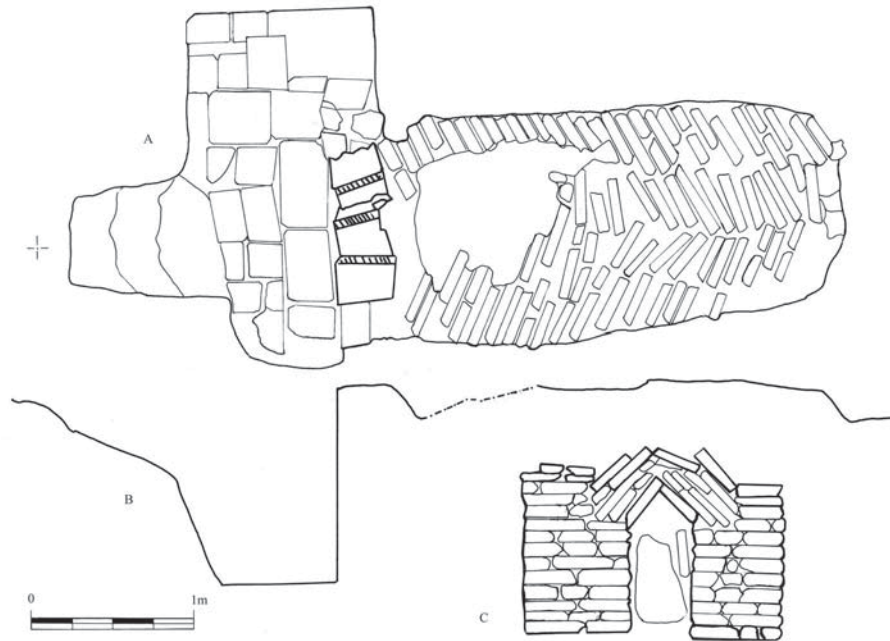


Figure 2. The red-brick tomb, plan, section and elevation.



Plate 1. The blocked doorway of the tomb.

Grave (UA3)61

A semi-contracted adult female was located 300mm below the original level. It is oriented east-west with the head to the west facing north. The hands were stretched in front of the corpse.

Grave (UA3)62

A dorsally extended child 10-13 years old, oriented east-west with the head to the east facing north. The hands are stretched behind the skull. The burial is wrapped in a mat and tied with a rope of which the remains were found around the



Plate 2. The skeleton in grave (UA3)60.

middle. The skull is protected by three red bricks, one on each side and the third on top. This burial has been cut by grave number (UA3)65.

Contents: a small disc bead has been collected near the legs.

Grave (UA3)63

An adult female 40-45 years old, dorsally extended, oriented east-west with the head to the west facing north east. The right hand is stretched over the pelvis, the left hand is extended beside the pelvis. The burial lies 800mm below the present level and had been sealed with red bricks.

Contents: a small disc bead was found near the pelvis.

Grave (UA3)64

An adult female 25 years old, dorsally extended, oriented east-west with the head to the east facing south. The right hand lies on, and the left hand is extended behind, the pelvis. It was observed that the burial was compressed into the grave, which led to the bending of the vertebral column and the neck. The burial lies 400mm below the leveled surface, and had been cut by grave number (UA3)62.

Grave (UA3)65

An adult female 50 years old, laid in extended position on the right hand side, oriented east-west, with the head to the

west facing south (Plate 3). The hands were extended beside the pelvis.

Grave (UA3)66

A contracted adult female 60 old, laid on the left hand side, oriented east-west, with the head to the east facing south (Plate 4). The left hand is folded in front of the jaw and the right hand is lying over the chest with the arm folded at a right angle.

Grave (UA3)67

A dorsally extended adult female, oriented east-west with the head to the west facing south. The hands are extended over the pelvis. The burial chamber is partially lined with red bricks.

Grave (UA3)68

Dorsally extended, oriented north east-south west, facing south east (Plate 5). The two hands are crossed over the chest.

Discussion

As a result of the machine leveling and erosion, the character of the grave superstructures is poorly defined. The graves appear to have been narrow cuts with rectangular and



Plate 3. The skeleton in grave (UA3)65.

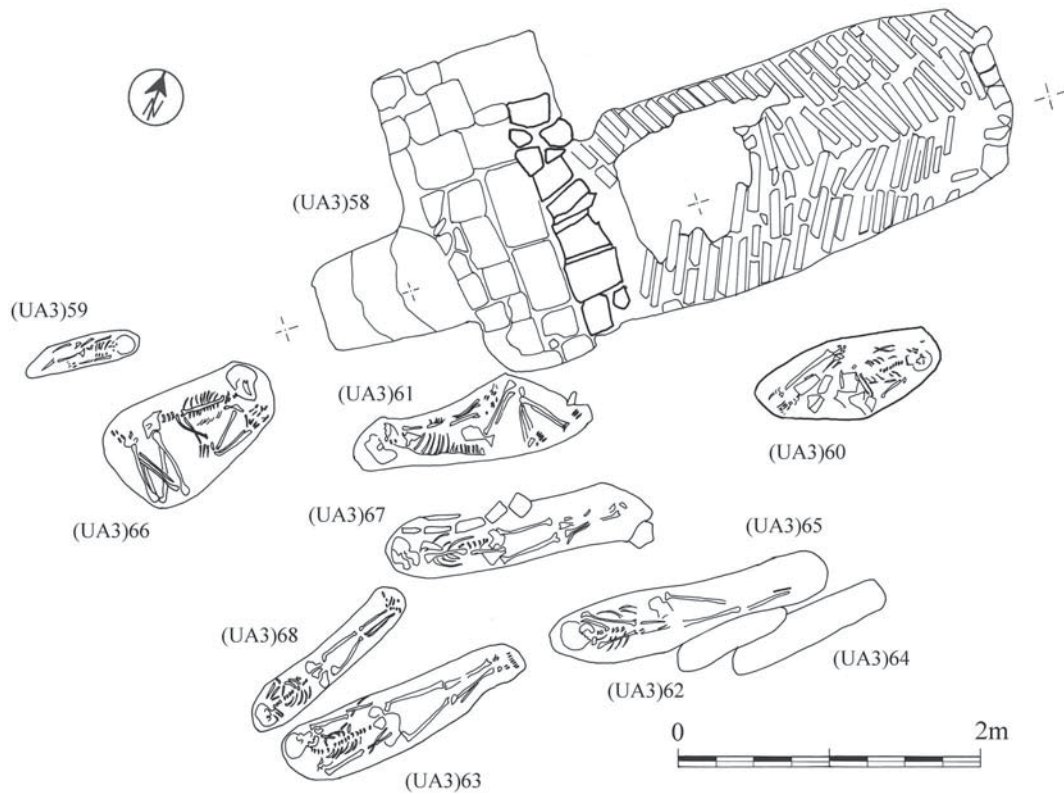


Figure 3. The vaulted tomb and the later graves.

rounded ends dug to a depth of 600-950mm below the top of the mound and survive to between 70-400mm below the actual surface as leveled by the bulldozers. Some graves are covered and bounded with red bricks. There is no uniform-

ity either in burial attitudes or orientation of the skeletons in the graves.

Burial attitudes and orientation can be classified into three groups:



Plate 4. The skeleton in grave (UA3)66.



Plate 5. The skeleton in grave (UA3)68.

1. Extended position

Seven graves, (UA3)59, (UA3)62, (UA3)63, (UA3)64, (UA3)65, (UA3)67 and (UA3)68 contained extended inhumations. Two of these were child burials. They were either dorsally extended or lying on the right side and were oriented east-west. Grave cuts are rectangular with rounded edges. The skull in grave (UA3)59 was supported on a ledge cut in the compact silt and cobble substratum, that in grave (UA3)63 by a red brick. Elsewhere at Soba graves of this type, but with an arrangement of bricks to protect the skull, have been recorded by Shinnie (1955, 26; on Mound C), and later by Welsby and Daniels (1991, 122). These graves date to the Christian period.

2. Semi-contracted position

Two graves, (UA3)60 and (UA3)65, were found in a semi-contracted position. Burials were oriented east-west with the head to the east, except in grave (UA3)61, where the head was to the west. None of the graves contained grave goods apart from the two copper-alloy ear rings found *in situ* in grave (UA3)60.

3. Contracted position

Only one body, (UA3)66, was found in a contracted position. The burial recovered is oriented east-west with the head

to the east. However, contracted burials with north-south orientation are well known in southerly areas as at Khartoum (Arkell 1944, 9) and Gereif East (Geus 1984). It has been suggested by Lenoble that it was the standard practice in the post-Meroitic period (1987, 93; see also Edwards 1991).

Conclusion

The orientation and burial attitudes of the skeletons excavated suggest that the religious beliefs of these people buried at Soba in this one cemetery were in a state of transition between pagan and Christian burial practices, or that this is a rare case of co-existence between different beliefs which existed at that time in the region. However, it should also be noted that contracted burials arranged in a variety of orientations were found in the Christian cemetery on mound Z and that these burials were clearly those of an intrusive group dating long after the post-Meroitic period (see Welsby 1998, 47-8, 278).

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