

# SUDAN & NUBIA

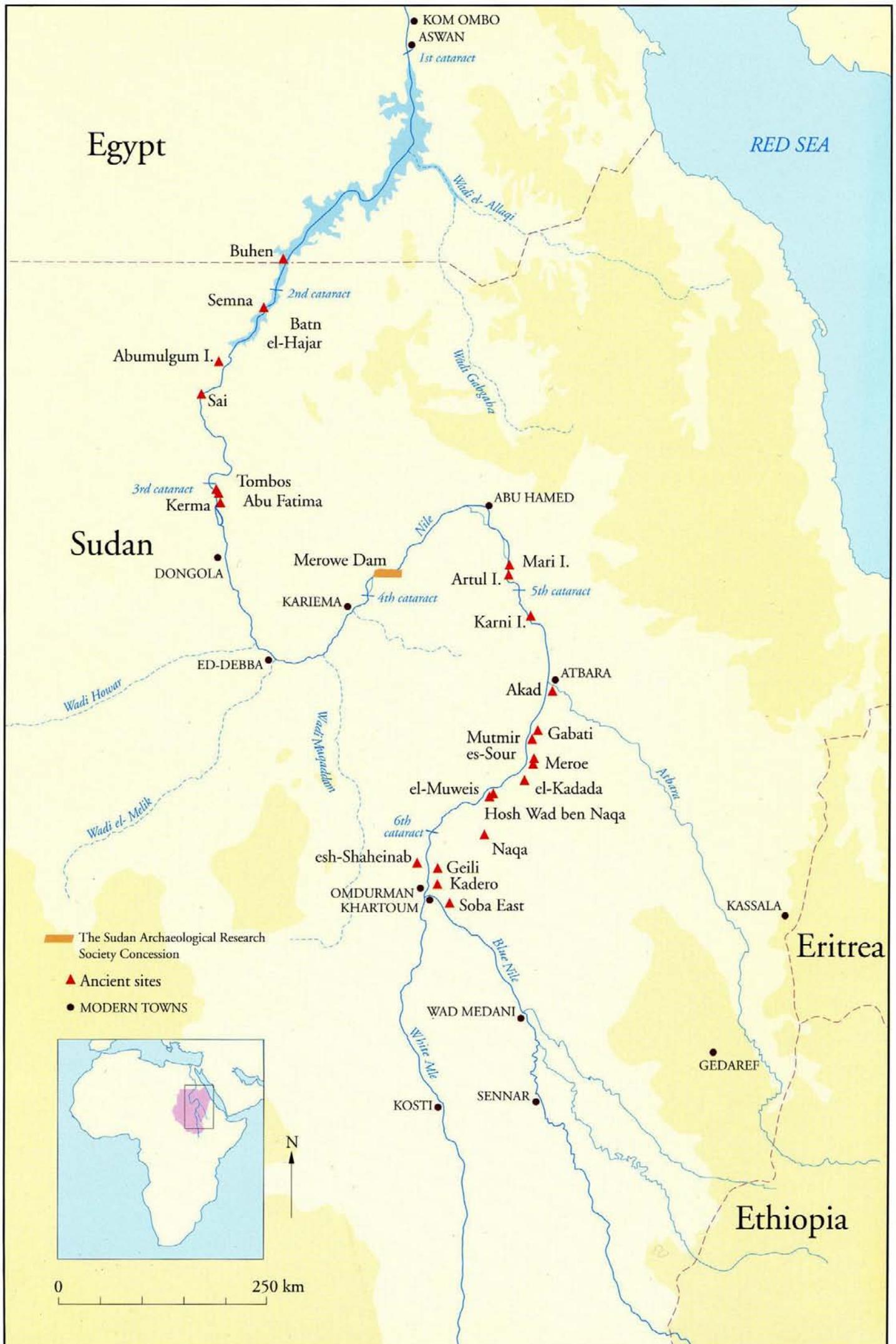
The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



*Bulletin No. 9*

2005





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*Front Cover:* Representation of a bound Kushite from the  
Mortuary Temple of Amenhotep III at Kom el-Hettân  
(photo © Memnon/Amenhotep III Project).



# Nubians in Egypt: Survey in the Aswan-Kom Ombo Region

*Maria Carmela Gatto*

## Introduction

A preliminary geo-archaeological survey was carried out early this year in the area between Aswan and Kom Ombo by The British Museum and The University of Milan.<sup>1</sup> The main goal of the project is to test the hypothesis that the First Cataract area was never a real borderline between the Nubian and Egyptian people and, as a consequence, to define the kind of interaction between them during different chronological periods, with an emphasis on the Nubian groups. A combined geo-archaeological approach to the research question is particularly important due to the frequent use by the Nubian cultures of the deserts surrounding the Nile Valley as part of their territory.

This first, brief, reconnaissance has clearly brought to light the dangers facing most of the archaeological sites in Aswan and Kom Ombo, as land reclamation and quarry activities along the Nile Valley and surrounding areas are rapidly destroying the archaeological evidence, which for the most part is still unknown to researchers.

There has been almost no previous study on this topic. Relevant works have been performed by the Canadian and Yale Expeditions at Kom Ombo (Butzer and Hansen 1968), by the Austrian Expedition (Junker 1919; 1920), and by the Combined Prehistoric Expedition (Wendorf *et al.* 1980, 1989) at Wadi Kubbaniya, by Reisner (1910) in the area near Shellal, and by the German-Swiss Mission at Elephantine Island (Raue 2002). Moreover, rock art stations were surveyed by Murray and Myers (1933), Winkler (1938) and Mayer (1981).

The localities selected for this season were (Figure 1):

- Shellal and its surroundings
- the desert edge behind Aswan, including Wadi Umm Buwayrat, Wadi el-Kimab and Wadi el-Haytah
- Wadi Abu Subeira and Wadi Kubbaniya
- the plateau behind New Arminna
- the desert edge behind the villages of New Qustul and New Tushka, including Wadi el-Lawi, Wadi Umm Matras and Wadi el-Kharit.

Leaving aside the Palaeolithic, Pharaonic and Roman

<sup>1</sup> Co-directed by the author and Mauro Cremaschi (University of Milan).

evidence, not pertinent in this context, and the rock art sites, which deserve further attention, two interesting finds related to a Nubian presence in the area were made: an Early Nubian stone tumulus in the Wadi el-Lawi, in the southern sector of the Kom Ombo Plain; and a possible Nubian cemetery dated to the Roman period at Wadi Kubbaniya (Figure 1). Here follows a very brief, preliminary report on them.

## The Early Nubian tumulus

During the first reconnaissance of the Wadi el-Lawi, the main southern tributary of Wadi Kharit, an isolated stone tumulus was found. It is located in a very small valley, named Shaab Negema (E 33.12468°, N 24.38024°) (Colour plate XXXV), to the west of the main wadi. It had already been plundered and the structure of the tumulus appears heavily disturbed and so not clearly recordable.

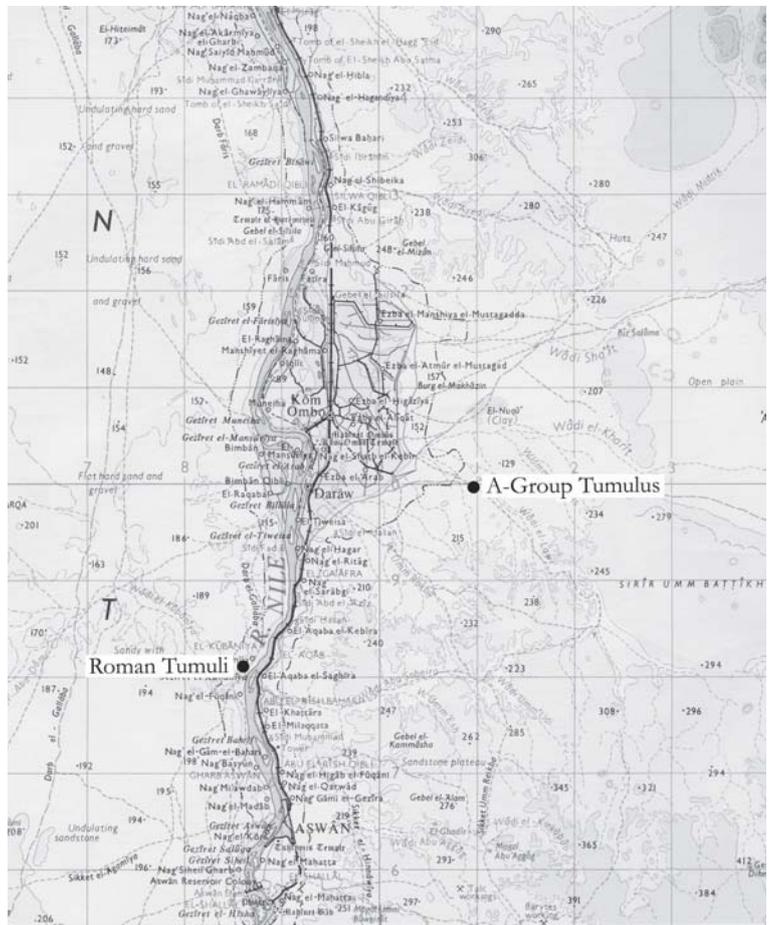


Figure 1. Map with areas mentioned in the text, including the two reported Nubian sites.

It is circular in shape, measuring approximately 7.5m in diameter. It appears to have two concentric stone rings: one in the centre, supposedly connected with the grave shaft, one on the exterior. The robber pit in the central area, which

should mostly correspond to the grave shaft, measures 2.5 x 2.5m. A standing stone slab (Plate 1), part of the internal ring, may possibly be interpreted as a stele, but only a systematic investigation can confirm or disprove this. The human bones have been scattered by the plunderers everywhere, particularly to the south east of the tumulus. Fortunately, 15 sherds belonging to six different vessels were found at the surface, again concentrated in the south east. Three pots (Colour plate XXXVI), two restricted simple contour deep bowls and one open bowl, are decorated with a wide rippled impression on a dark brown burnished exterior surface and have a black interior. Two are brown burnished deep bowls, while one is a small dark brown smoothed bowl with rounded base.



Plate 1. *Shaab Negema; the stone tumulus and the possible stele.*

Based upon similar evidence along the Nile Valley, both in Upper Egypt and Nubia as well as in the Western Desert (Gatto 2001, in press; Darnell and Darnell per. comm.), including that mentioned in the Kom Ombo plain by Butzer and Hansen (1968), the grave can be dated almost certainly to the late stage of the early A-Group phase (as defined in Gatto 2000). As far as the relative chronology is concerned, the grave should be dated around the mid-4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, being contemporary with the Egyptian Nagada IIa-d phase.

This find is one of the few known north of Aswan and in the Eastern Desert. Already unique cultural features have been recorded in the southern part of Upper Egypt and the northern part of Lower Nubia during the Predynastic/A-

Group period. They are unknown in the surrounding areas and may indicate the presence of a regional variant of the culture in the area surrounding the First Cataract and from there northward up to Hierakonpolis and even Armant which mixes both Egyptian and Nubian traditions together (Gatto 2003; in press). The tumulus is now under threat as the land reclamation at the mouth of Wadi el-Lawi is reaching the area where it is located. Further work on it is planned for next season.

### The Roman (Nubian) tumuli

To the north of the mouth of Wadi Kubhaniya, along the Nile Valley, we relocated a late period site briefly mentioned by de Morgan (1894). It consists of a cemetery, WK1 (E 32.85863°, N 24.23985°), the graves of which are dug into the rock of the upper part of the gebel. They are simple rectangular shafts covered by a worked stone slab. Inside there was a mummy with pottery as a funerary offering (as we could reconstruct from the remains scattered in the area). The cemetery has been plundered and pieces of mummies and potsherds lie everywhere, particularly at the southern end. De Morgan could not date it but at first sight the potsherds appear to be from the late Roman period, both cooking pots and amphorae, mainly consisting of the so-called Aswan fabric (Spencer pers. comm.).

In front of the Roman cemetery, on the upper and lower terraces of the same gebel, there are stone tumuli, named WK3 (E 32.85999°, N 24.23852°) (Colour plate XXXVII). These are plundered and human bones and potsherds lie scattered around. As far as the human bones are concerned, some of them still have remnants of linen attached but do not show evidence of mummification. The structure of the grave suggests a Nubian affiliation; however, all the pottery is Roman in date and wheel-made (Colour plate XXXVIII, Plate 2). Apparently, it is contemporary to that from the Roman cemetery nearby.

There is a possibility that these graves are connected with the Blemmyes or contemporary Nubian groups, although their cultural and material definition needs still to be defined (Barnard in press). Similar tumuli were noticed also in the surrounding gebels. Some others, WK5 (E 32.85835°, N 24.23390°), are in our concession right to the south of WK3. The same kind of evidence has been found and excavated in Hierakonpolis (Ralston 2001; 2002; Pyke 2002) and noted elsewhere in southern Upper Egypt (Rose pers. comm.).

### Concluding remarks

Clearly this first season's work has shown how much Nubian evidence can be found in this region dating from prehistory up to the late periods. There is definitely more than expected and it can be found not only along the valley but also in the surrounding deserts. This is the case with the early A-Group grave which seems to be located along one



Plate 2. WK3; fragment of a bowl dated to the late Roman period.

of the main desert routes which connected Lower Nubia with Upper Egypt, particularly with the area of Elkab and Hierakonpolis (and maybe even far to the north).

The geographical border between Egypt and Nubia is at Jebel es-Silsila, north of Kom Ombo. However, beginning with the First Dynasty, that section of the Nile Valley north of Elephantine Island was included in Pharaonic Egypt, becoming the First Nome of the kingdom. For a long time the most northern evidence for Nubian cultures was from Kubbaniya, just north of Aswan and the area south of it, the Lower Nubia region. This spatial distribution of Nubian and Egyptian evidence seemed to confirm the location of the political border at Elephantine. New research undertaken in the last few years, including both re-analysis and publication of old data, particularly from the sites found during the Archaeological Survey of Nubia (Reisner 1910; Gatto and Tiraterra 1996; Gatto 1997; 1998; 2000; Giuliani forthcoming) and the Saharan sites at Armant (Gatto and Giuliani in progress), and new surveys and excavations at Elephantine Island (Raue 2002), el-Adayma (Midant-Reynes and Buchez 2002), Hierakonpolis (Friedman 1992; 2001a; 2001b; 2004; Giuliani 2001a; 2001b; 2004; in press; Gatto 2003), and in the desert behind Armant (Darnell 2002), have brought to light Nubian cemeteries and probably settlements, as well as Nubian pottery, in Upper Egypt. These new discoveries are assigned to the A-Group, C-Group, Kerma and Pan-Grave cultures and are dated from around 3800 to 1500 BC. A new 17<sup>th</sup> Dynasty inscription from Elkab (Davies 2003a; 2003b) may well indicate that the Kerma Kingdom used the desert routes to attack Egypt, bypassing the First Cataract area, going directly to Elkab, which would suggest that Elkab was much more important than Elephantine as the border area for both Egyptians and

Nubians. It is interesting to note that, during the New Kingdom, Hierakonpolis/Elkab marked the northern border of the area governed by the Viceroy of Kush. Because of this border the deserts surrounding the Nile Valley were an important part of the Egyptian and Nubian territories. In part because the Nile cataracts were not easy to cross, most of the main desert routes connecting with the south reach the Egyptian Nile valley in the Hierakonpolis/Elkab area and, far to the north, in the Qena bend area. The finding of the A-Group tumulus out in the desert east of Kom Ombo seems to confirm the importance of desert routes for the Nubian people who were dealing directly with Egypt.

### Acknowledgments

For permission to work, the project is very grateful to Dr Zahi Hawass, Secretary-General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities of Egypt, and his colleagues on the Permanent Committee of the SCA. Much appreciated is also the great help received during this first season from Dr Mohamed El Bialy, Director-General of the Aswan and Nubian Antiquities, and Dr Mohi Eldi Mustafa, responsible for the Aswan Antiquities, and from the local inspector Mohamed Ali al Nagar. A special thank goes to Vivian Davies, Keeper of the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan at The British Museum, and to Fred Wendorf, President of The Combined Prehistoric Expedition Foundation, who strongly supported this project. I want also to thank my colleagues Dietrich Raue, Cornelius von Pilgrim, Pamela Rose, Gillian Pyke, Hans Barnard, Jeffrey Spencer, Deborah and John Darnell for their help in collecting information for this article. This season has been funded by The British Museum and The Combined Prehistoric Expedition Foundation.

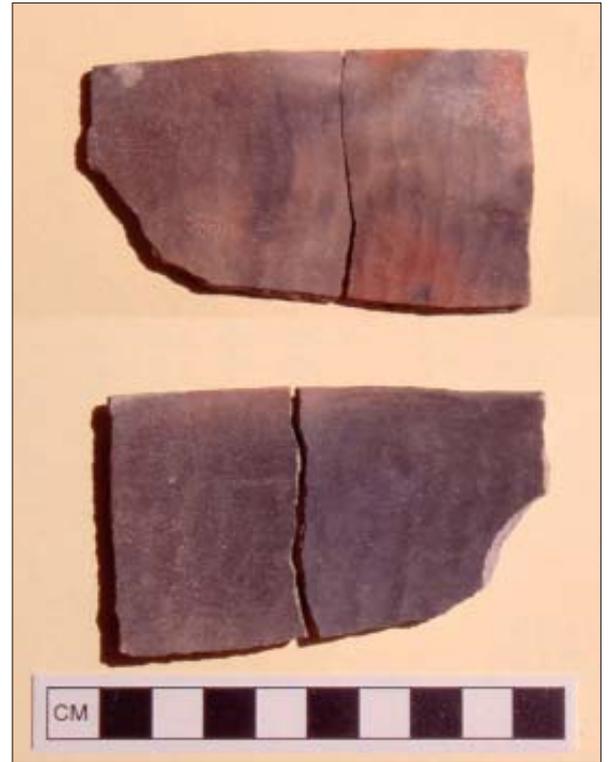
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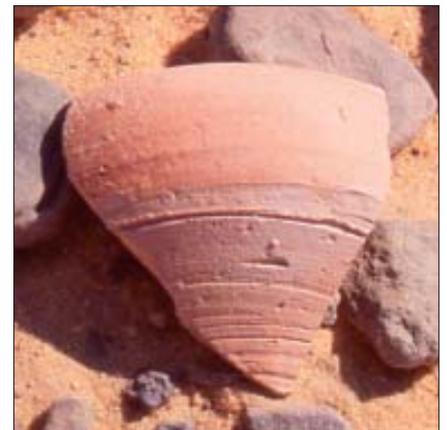
*Colour plate XXXV. Survey in the Aswan-Kom Ombo Region.  
Shaab Negema; the stone tumulus.*



*Colour plate XXXVI. Survey in the Aswan-Kom Ombo Region.  
Shaab Negema; interior and exterior surfaces of  
one of the rippled vessels.*



*Colour plate XXXVII. Survey in the Aswan-Kom Ombo Region.  
WK3; a stone tumulus.*



*Colour plate XXXVIII. Survey in the  
Aswan-Kom Ombo Region.  
WK3; fragment of a bowl dated to the  
late Roman period.*