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The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



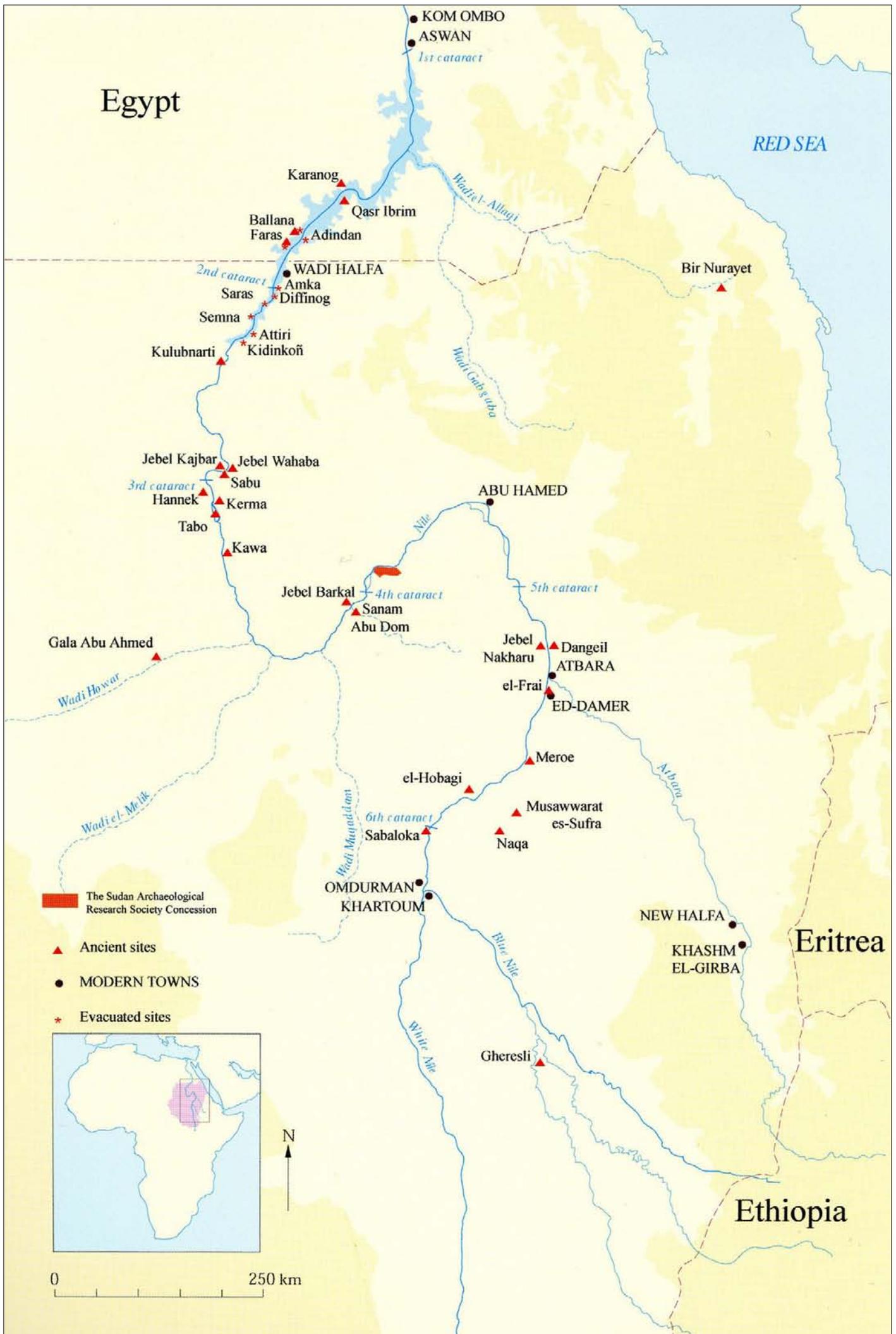
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Front cover: Beja man by the well at Bir Vario, Eastern Desert (photo K. Pluskota).



The Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project

Excavations in the vicinity of ed-Doma (AKSE), 2005-2006

Derek A. Welsby

The concession of the Sudan Archaeological Research Society within the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project (MDASP) includes the left bank of the Nile and the islands between the fortress at Suweigi West (Dar el-Arab) upstream to Jebel Musa at Kirbekan. The concession, which extends along the Nile for approximately 40km, includes a number of large islands and the area threatened by inundation extends well away from the banks of the river. Detailed survey and excavation of the whole area are impossible within the timeframe available. In the light of this the

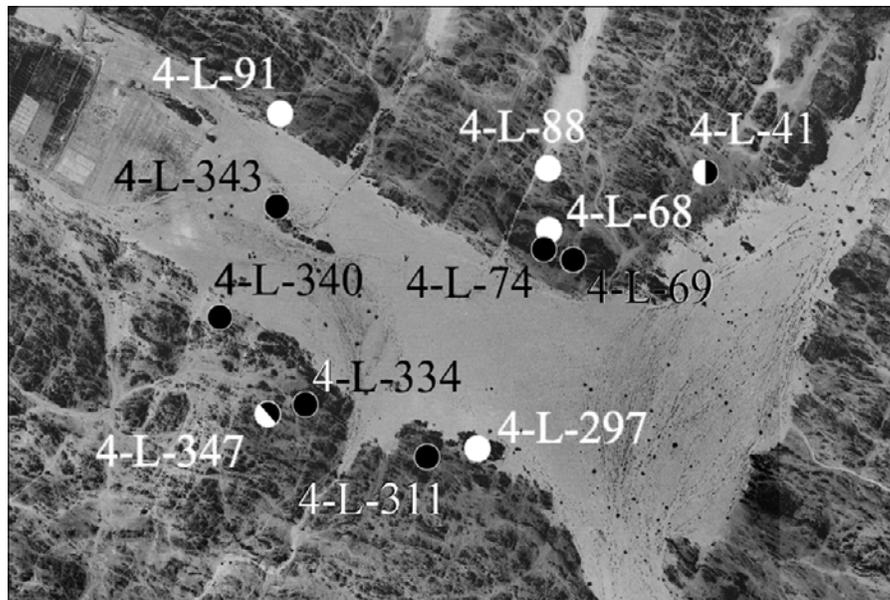


Plate 1. Main sites by the palaeochannel.

strategy has been for small areas to be surveyed in detail followed by excavation of a sample of the sites located during those surveys. Survey began in the central part of the concession based at et-Tereif in 1999¹ (Welsby 2002) and was followed, from 2002 to the present, by four sea-

sons of excavations² of cemeteries and settlements on the left bank and on the islands of Umm Melyekta, el-Hilla, Umm Muri and Mis. In 2003-4, survey and trial excavations were also begun in the region around Dar el-Arab followed by seasons of excavation in 2004/5 and 2005/6.³

In the winter of 2004-5, SARS/The British Museum began work in the upstream part of the concession, based in the hamlet of ed-Doma, where over 650 sites were recorded (Welsby 2005). This was followed, in the winter of 2005-6, by excavations of a number of those sites by two teams, the work supported by funds from the British Museum, the Egypt Exploration Society and the Institute for Bioarchaeology. These teams were in the field from 2nd December 2005 until 4th February 2006.⁴

Fourteen sites were investigated in detail by the ed-Doma team (Plate 1) although the work in the Kerma cemetery, site 4-L-88, on the tumuli at sites 4-L-41 and 4-L-68(18) and in the medieval cemetery, site 4-M-142, has not been completed. All other sites have been excavated down to the subsoil and in many cases to the bedrock.

'Settlements'

Several sites which appeared to be non-funerary were investigated.

Site 4-L-343 is situated towards the north-western end of a rocky outcrop within the palaeochannel. It consisted of a number of contiguous rings, approximately 1.3-1.65m in diameter, formed of stone walls one stone thick and a few courses high. There were no doorways into them, no rubble which can have fallen from the superstructure and no post-holes. Very little material was found associated with these. Their function and date are unclear.

Site 4-L-340 was similar to that at 4-L-343. It was set on a level terrace a little above the palaeochannel on its southwestern bank. The rings of stone were again contiguous but were often only one course of stone in height (Plate 2). Some were built one against another but, as they all rested on the same surface, they may have been broadly contemporary. Nothing was found to suggest their function. In the surface immediately predating the

³ Directed by Pawel Wolf.

⁴ The team based at ed-Doma consisted of Pamela Bowler (archaeologist), Susannah Chapman (archaeologist), Henriette Hafsaas (archaeologist), Habab Idris Ahmed (NCAM inspector), Tina Jakob (archaeologist, physical anthropologist), Tay Keen (archaeologist), Mohammed Ibrahim Mohammed (cook), Matt Nicholas (archaeologist), Derek Welsby (director, photographer), Isabella Welsby Sjöström (assistant director, pottery specialist).

¹ Directed by Derek Welsby.

² Directed by Derek Welsby, Dorian Fuller, John Payne, Gerardo Carpio and Andrew Ginns.



Plate 2. Site 4-L-340, stone rings.

stone rings was a number of circular shallow depressions, a few of which were sealed by the stone rings. Some of these had a small central hollow, not deep enough to have supported a central stake or post. In this surface, and in those found at a lower level, was a number of pits and post-holes. The recognition of the post-holes was difficult and of those identified none formed recognisable structures. Very small amounts of pottery were found throughout these layers.

Site 4-L-334. The stone rings here were similar to those at site 4-L-340 but much less well defined (Colour plate VII) suggesting that they were perhaps much older. Several had a circular depression in the centre with the shallow hollow in the middle. Other depressions of this type were found elsewhere in the surface on which the rings were constructed. Again, no post-holes for structural timbers were found which could be associated with the rings. After removal of several layers down to the subsoil/bedrock three substantial post-holes were found arranged in a shallow arc. These had a very distinctive and readily recognisable fill but, notwithstanding this, no further holes could be located. Pottery was extremely scarce on this site. A little to the north-west of the rings a line of stones ran across the flat ground between two rock outcrops. No timber features which could have made this an effective barrier were found.

Site 4-L-311 consisted of three large circular cleared areas and four smaller ones amongst the general scatter of stones on a flat terrace. In the centre of a few of these were the same circular shallow depressions as found on the sites already noted. Concentrations of stones around the smaller areas suggested that they may have been enclosed by a low 'wall'. Many post- and stake-holes were found but only one group of 14 could be confidently associated with a structure. They formed an arc extending for a distance of over 4m. It did not prove possible to find further post-holes form-

ing the rest of a hut circle. However, in some of the areas where these would be expected, bedrock outcropped and hence there would have been no possibility to excavate post-holes. Pottery from this site was of Neolithic, Kerma and possible of slightly later date.

Site 4-L-41 was a substantial circular stone hut, with walls over 500mm in height, abutted on its west side by circular areas ringed by single rows of stones. A doorway led into the hut from the south and a semi-circular row of stones divided off the back of the hut. Its 'floor' surface contained an amount of bone and large sherds of Kerma period pottery were found associated with it. Further

excavation, and the identification of the bone as human, indicated that there had originally been a tumulus here of type V (see Welsby 2005, 4) which had been partly demolished and incorporated into a hut after it had been robbed. Excavation of the grave has yet to be undertaken.

Site 4-L-74 was a concentration of features, each an area about 1m in diameter which had been cleared of the surface gravel exposing the underlying earth. Two of these were sectioned and remains of a central upright stake of palm was found.

Site 4-L-69 sat on a level terrace high above the palaeo-channel. The site was unique within the survey area being covered in flat stone slabs among which small circular structures could be recognised. Removal of the slabs revealed the well-preserved monuments standing several courses, up to 500mm high, which frequently abutted one another. These were all totally excavated. Most of them contained an earth and stone fill and nothing more (Colour plate VIII, Plate 4). However, a few had pavements of stone within them beneath the stone fill (Plate 5) and two had an arrangement of large slabs, the functions of which were unclear. The large amounts of rubble on the site indicates that they must have attained a much greater elevation.

Although originally thought to be grave monuments the absence of a burial chamber either beneath or within them, along with the total absence of human bone associated with them, suggests that they had another function. Structures constructed in a very similar way, of very similar size, some with stone pavements within, have been found on a site dated to the early Kushite (Napatan) period on the other bank of the river near the village of el-Argoub in the Wadi Umm Rahu by the Gdańsk Archaeological Mission (pers. comm. Mahmoud et-Tayeb). These are certainly associated with evidence for occupation by both humans and animals.



In the light of this evidence it must be assumed that the structures at site 4-L-69 relate to a settlement rather than being funerary features. It might be suggested that they formed the bases of storage facilities, perhaps *quseiba* (mud-storage bins).

Dug into the earth and friable bedrock of the surface on which the monuments were built were many pits filled with ash and, in some cases, animal bone. These may have been associated with the stone monuments but a clear relationship was not observed. Certainly some pits were sealed by the monuments. The small amount of pottery from this site was of *Kerma Moyen* and *Classique* date.

Funerary sites

Several cemeteries were excavated in part along with a number of isolated features which are also probably funerary.

Crevice graves – two natural-rock crevices in the bedrock were investigated. Both had stone slabs across the top of the crevice and, at site 4-L-313, remains of a wall blocking the north end of the crevice. No trace of bone was found in either of these but one sherd of *Kerma Classique* pottery was recovered.

Tunnel grave – a single example, site 4-L-297, was investigated (Plate 3). The only finds, from within the wind-blown sand in the chamber, were pieces of rope and twigs suggesting that it had been used as a trap. However, other structures of this type in the survey area contain human skeletal material so the original function as funerary monuments seems certain. The chamber was aligned due north-south. At the northern end of the stone slabs roofing the chamber was a small hole suggestive of a hole designed for pouring libations to the deceased.

Dome graves – three small graves of this type were excavated. In all cases they contained no bone or pottery although those at site 4-L-91 contained many lithics which abound in that area. These may not have been purposely deposited within the dome graves. The other dome grave,



Plate 3. Site 4-L-297, tunnel grave.

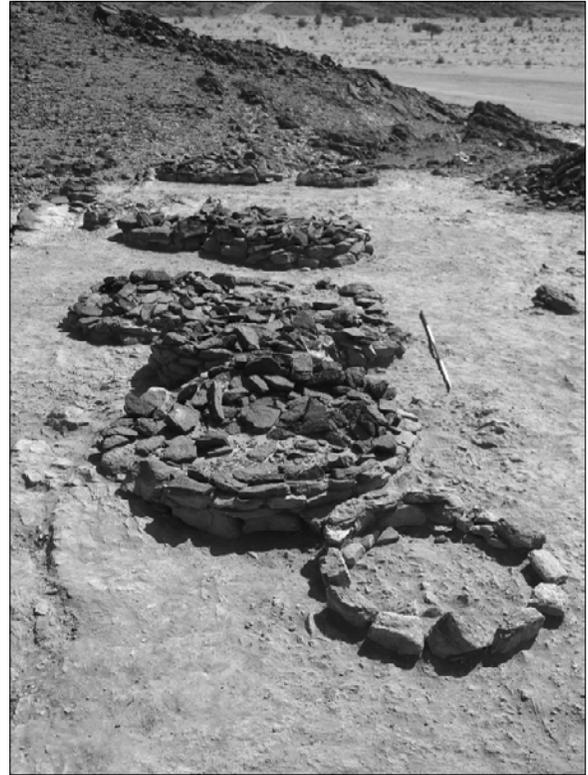


Plate 4. Site 4-L-69, monuments.

at site 4-L-309, was of interest. It was certainly later in date than the adjacent boundary wall as it rested on one of the stones of that wall. This is the first secure evidence we have to suggest the antiquity of the boundary walls although the absence of dating evidence from the dome grave itself is not helpful.

Site 4-L-347. The isolated circular stone platform was excavated. It may have been the base of a tumulus or a structure of the type found at site 4-L-69.

Site 4-L-68. One of the several type V tumuli on this site was excavated, the grave containing the body of a small child. A cairn close by was also excavated but the grave pit has yet to be examined.

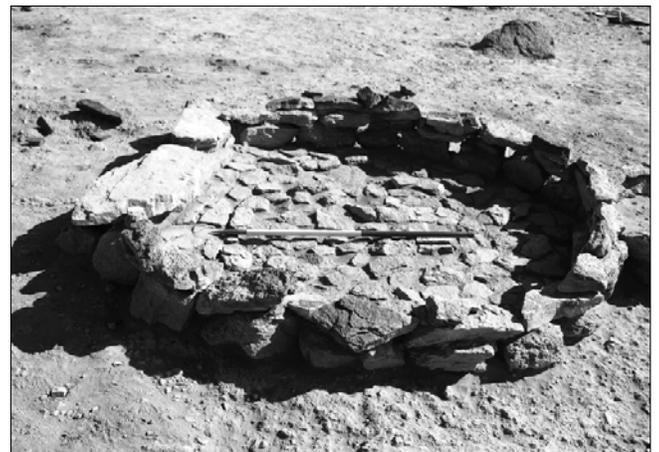


Plate 5. Site 4-L-69, monument 31 with pavement 106.

The cemeteries at sites 4-L-88 and 4-M-142 were extensively excavated.

Site 4-L-88 was set on the sloping bank of a tributary wadi leading into the palaeochannel. Two areas were excavated while a further concentration of tomb monuments a little to the north east was not examined. At the start of excavation the monuments appeared as semi-circular terraces on the slope revetted by a line of large stones. Excavation, however, quickly revealed that these were circular stone



Plate 6. Site 4-L-88(B), grave 42, skeleton 93 accompanied by a single pottery vessel.

monuments partly buried under a thick layer of earth and coarse gravel (Colour plate IX). They cover an oval or circular grave pit, in area (A) excavated down to, and in some cases into, the friable granite bedrock which was close to the surface. In the adjacent area (B) the earth layer was much thicker and hence the graves were considerably deeper, many in excess of 1m. The crouched inhumations were usually orientated east-west with the head to the east facing north (Plate 6) although a few had a markedly different orientation. One grave contained two adolescents placed supine, but one had its legs flexed. The interments in this cemetery were accompanied by up to three pottery vessels among them typical *Kerma Classique* tulip beakers (Colour plate X), and had been laid on a hide covered in red ochre of which traces remained.

Site 4-M-142. Close to ed-Doma on the undulating alluvial plain was a cemetery of Christian box graves and Muslim

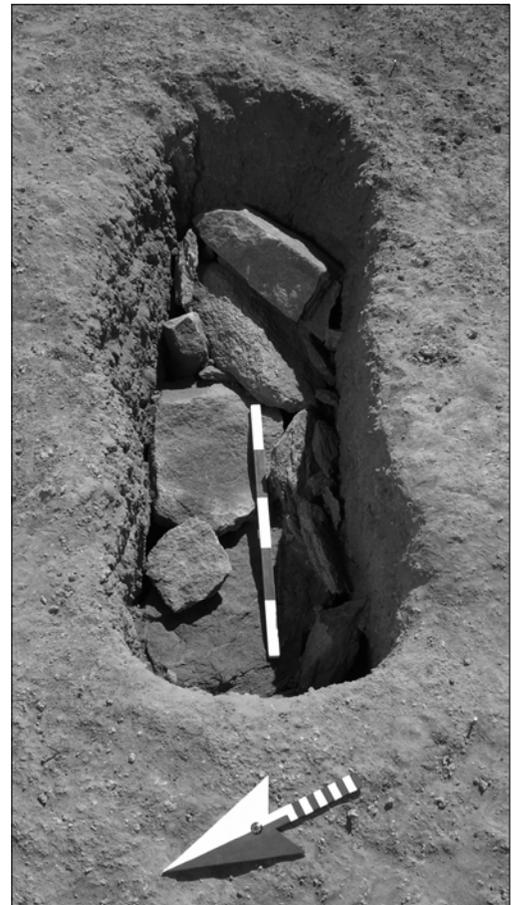


Plate 7. Site 4-M-142, grave 56 with slabs covering body.

graves marked with stone slab pavements. All but three of the medieval graves were excavated. The graves were in many cases typical of contemporary burials in the region with a long narrow grave pit containing the supine extended body placed with the head to the west. In several cases the head was symbolically protected by stones. Many graves had ledges along the sides on which rested stone slabs totally covering the body (Plate 7). A few bodies were extremely well preserved with much soft tissue and sometimes with the textile shroud and the rope binding remaining. A few graves were exceptional. One was covered not by a box grave but by a tumulus beneath which was a long line of large stones set slightly to one side of the grave cut. The method of burial of the individual placed in the grave beneath was normal. A few bodies were placed in a flexed position (Plate 8) although in every other respect the grave monument and cut were typical of the others in the cemetery. As expected grave goods were very rare although two crosses (Plate 9), two rings, a pendant and fragments of leather and basketry (Plate 10) were recovered.

The Finds

The human skeletal remains recovered have greatly increased the Kerma population available for study from the SARS



Plate 8. Site 4-M-142, grave 45, crouched inhumation skeleton 85.



Plate 9. Site 4-M-142, cross.

concession while the medieval remains will form a good comparative collection for the large number of skeletons recovered from site 3-J-23 at et-Tereif and on Mis Island further downstream. The pottery of the Kerma period highlights the juxtaposition of typical Kerma products being used along with those pots made in the local tradition.

Rock art and rock gongs

The rock art and gongs recorded during the survey were studied in more detail by two specialists during December 2005 (see Kleinitz and Koenitz, this volume).

Conclusions

As elsewhere in the central and eastern part of the SARS concession the identification of settlements, apart from those of the medieval and post-medieval periods, is far from easy.

Of the sites excavated this season, the function of the stone rings remains unclear and the evidence for settlement activities at earlier phases on those sites is limited. The small amounts of pottery, the cleared areas, depressions, post-holes and pits indicate that human activity was taking place in those areas but the occupation was presumably of limited duration.

The cemeteries are particularly interesting. Along with those excavated by our Peruvian colleagues this season three have been excavated which all appear to have been in use during the *Kerma Classique* period, although burials at site 4-L-100 may have continued in use a little later. All three cemeteries are very different, the only common characteristic being some of the pottery. The tomb monuments vary dramatically as does the treatment of the grave pits and the body orientations.

Acknowledgements

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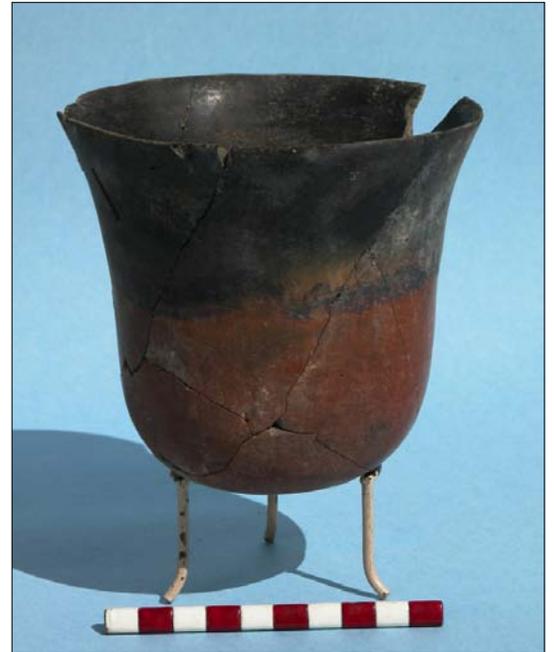


Plate 10. Site 4-M-142, leather and basketry.

Colour plate VII. AKSE project. The settlement features at site 4-L-334.



Colour plate VIII. AKSE project. Monuments at site 4-L-69 looking towards sites 4-L-340 and 4-L-334.



Colour plate X. AKSE project. Kerma Classique beaker from site 4-L-88, grave (B)77.

Colour plate IX. AKSE project. Tumuli in the cemetery at site 4-L-88.