

# SUDAN & NUBIA

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The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



*Bulletin No. 18*

2014





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- Front cover:* Examining the pharaonic inscriptions at Khashm el-Bab on the Korosko Road, November 2013 (photo: D. A. Welsby).
- Sudan & Nubia* is a peer-reviewed journal



# Kurgus 2012: report on the survey

Isabella Welsby Sjöström

## Past work

While the main focus of fieldwork at Kurgus has been the Pharaonic inscriptions on the Hagr el-Merwa (KRG1), the other archaeological vestiges in the immediate environs have gradually been investigated over the past seasons (in 1998, 2000, 2002 and 2004: cf. Welsby Sjöström 1998; 2001a; 2001b; 2003). Several cemeteries in the vicinity of the Hagr have been surveyed and various tumuli excavated in the nearest, KRG3, as well as some of the burials in the immediate vicinity of the quartz outcrop itself. The burials at KRG3 are marked by superstructures of some ten different types, and examples of each type were chosen for excavation. Their date was shown to range from probably the Post-Meroitic through the Christian (box graves) and into the Islamic period.<sup>1</sup> Grave goods were extremely sparse in all periods, and the alignment of the bodies in the Post-Meroitic was non-specific; consequently, the dating of all but the box graves remains hypothetical at present (cf. Haddow and Nicholas, *infra*).

Apart from the cemeteries, the fort (KRG2) near the river bank, some 1.2km from the Hagr (KRG1), was investigated in 2000, establishing beyond reasonable doubt that the present structure is of Medieval Christian date, with Post-Meroitic pottery sherds being found in the layers under the main fort wall on the east side.

## 2012 season fieldwork

During the 2012 season (18<sup>th</sup> Nov. – 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec.), co-directed by W. V. Davies (epigraphy) and the author (archaeology), our aim was to look further afield in order to get a better idea of the landscape and date of the discernible archaeological remains; the rather diminutive survey team consisted of the author and Simon Mortimer.

With the aid of Google Earth imagery several tumuli cemeteries were located (marked on the plan, Figure 1) and with the aid of their coordinates and print outs of the various areas as many as possible of these were visited on both river banks, as well as making yet another exploratory visit to Kurgus Island. Finally, the area between, as well as north and south of the Hagr and the fort, was field-walked (Figure 2). No finds were collected (with the exception of one uniform button (Plate 1) from a railway construction camp), so as not to disturb the sites in the event of further work being undertaken at them in the future, but photographs were taken of sample sherds.

On the east bank, where we had access to one of the SARS landrovers, we travelled a distance of 26km, reaching just beyond the railway station at Degash and just north of



Plate 1. A general list button (not specifically for any corps), from KRG31b associated with the construction of the Sudan Military Railway through this region in 1897.

the Abu Dis railway station to the south (see Figure 1). As there is no car ferry at Kurgus we limited ourselves to walking on the west bank, and consequently only covered a distance of some 10km. In the vicinity of the dig house (located between KRG1 and KRG2) we field-walked an area of *c.* 2km<sup>2</sup>. There are some irrigated fields in the area, but especially to the south of the house the ground is frequently obscured by sand dunes. On the west bank the band of cultivation is narrow, but it is on this side that the more intense (modern) settlement is to be found. While there is cultivation also on the east bank, here the modern settlement is much sparser and the area is a great deal sandier. Transport by road, albeit a rough track, is still much easier on the west bank, being far less sandy than the east bank; the new tarmac road from Atbara to Abu Hamed to the east of the Nile runs some distance away from the villages and the river. On both sides of the river the surviving ancient cemeteries, marked on the surface by tumuli, are located on the gravel terraces very close to the fields under cultivation on the west bank, and some distance away on the east. While one would assume that the cemeteries would in all periods have been located away from the fertile land by the river, subsequent cultivation may have removed or largely obscured any trace of ancient sites. We did, however, find tumuli in amongst the sandy area to the south of the dig house, for example.

It was hoped that some traces of settlement dating to the time of the Pharaonic inscriptions would be found, although evidence of any date was of interest. What was found included sherd scatters in a number of areas, mostly of Post-Meroitic and Christian date, as well as a few sherds of probable Neolithic, *Kerma Ancien* and *Kerma Moyen* date, but no Egyptian imports prior to the early medieval period (see pg. 132).

## Results

The sites are marked on the maps, based on Google Earth images, in Figures 1 and 2. It was not possible to visit all the sites marked; sites that were visited are listed in Appendix 1, while in Appendix 2 are those that, for whatever reason, were not. It is clear that the sites are at risk from renewed tomb-robbing in conjunction with the current 'gold rush', although it appears that the skeleton and grave goods are

<sup>1</sup> Excavated in error, due to the superstructure consisting of a circular stone cairn.

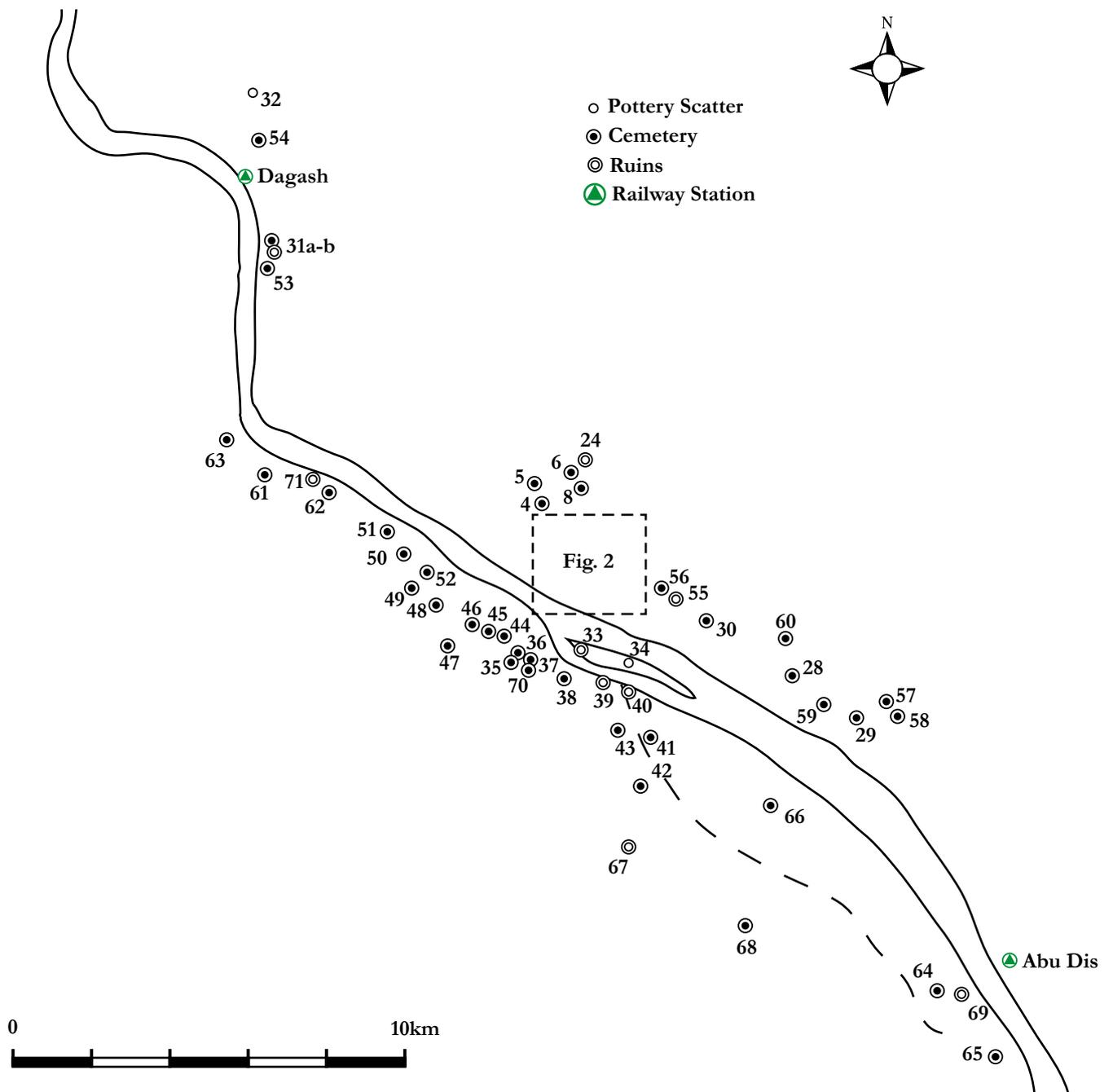


Figure 1. The area surveyed.

seldom disturbed, as we rather surprisingly saw no freshly broken fragments of bone or pottery by the disturbed tumuli. Very little pottery was noted altogether; in the cemetery areas only sherds of Neolithic type were found, and even this was rare. An earlier survey has also been carried out in this area by the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM), and it should be borne in mind that some surface pottery may well already have been collected. At the time of going to press a preliminary report of this earlier survey has been published, and a map of the survey area shows that the area visited by us falls entirely within that surveyed by NCAM (Abdelraman Ali Mohamed *et al.* 2014, 78, fig. 93). Thus what is presented here is offered as supplementary (or complementary) information.



Plate 2. Kerma period sherds.

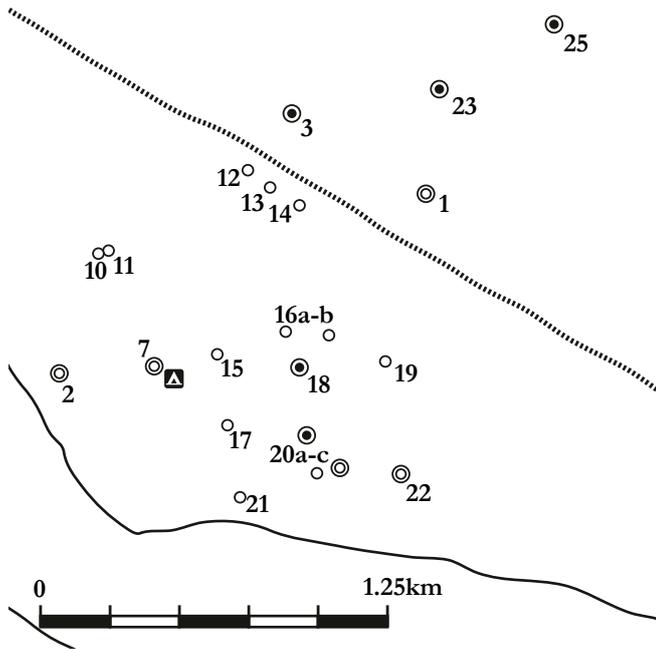


Figure 2. Map of the area around Hagar el-Merwa (KRG1).

### Between the Hagar el-Merwa (KRG1) and the Nile

In the area between KRG1 and the Nile a number of areas with extensive but not very dense pottery scatters were found. The date of these generally fell within the Post-Meroitic to Medieval Christian periods, with a few sherds displaying Pan-Grave characteristics. Just to the west of the railway we found some sherds apparently of a date equivalent to the *Kerma Ancien* and *Kerma Moyen* periods, with both roulette and incised decoration, the latter of a Pan-Grave style (Plates 2 and 3). Two white quartz grinding bases were also noted near the railway track (Plate 4).

These scatters appear in the areas free of wind-blown sand dunes or cultivation, but without any definite evidence for structures – it may be that these pottery scatters are the result of bringing *sebakhin* soil to fertilize (now disused) fields, i.e. they may not be *in situ*. Where fields are currently cultivated pottery does not show up, possibly obscured by the irrigation-deposited silt. When checking the historical images on Google Earth it is clear that in a number of areas fields have gone out of cultivation since 2003 (latest imagery is from 2012 and 2013). A few isolated stone-built tumuli, not obviously robbed, were noted near the dig house, both to its north and south.

### West and east bank

The rest of the survey was carried out by driving north and south along the east bank and by walking north and south on the west bank, reached by crossing the Nile at Kurgus. Apart from the cemeteries, that are consistently located on the infertile gravel terraces above the flood plain, there is also a Mahdiya period fort, better preserved than the scrappy wall



Plate 3. Kerma period sherds, black-topped bowls with incised and roulette decoration.



remains on the island (see below), but very overgrown. The fort is located some 50m from the river, currently within a palm grove, and is thus not visible on Google Earth. It measures *c.* 55 x 45m and its outer walls have irregularly spaced loopholes on the west (inland) side (Plate 5). The east wall does not survive. The walls are *c.* 1m thick and made of mud brick. The southern wall is largely destroyed



Plate 4. Fragments of a white quartz grinding base found near the railway track.



Plate 5. Loopholes in the west wall of the fort on the west bank.

and in part assimilated into a modern house. The layout of the interior is very indistinct. At a nearby 'modern' Islamic cemetery stands the mud-brick *qubba* of Abu Gezan (Plate 6), also noted by Crawford (1953, 17), but with no additional information, except a brief description of the building technique (corbelled) and a statement that it was even then in a much weathered state.



Plate 6. *Qubbat Abu Gezan*, west bank.

The cemeteries consist of often quite large tumuli covered in small gravel, very much like that on the surrounding ground surface. This aspect is due to wind erosion, but it remains clear that the superstructures of the burials did not consist of anything more elaborate than a mound of earth that the wind has partly eroded to leave a covering of gravel.

### Kurgus Island

No cemeteries were found on the island. This was not surprising, as the island is not large and the fertile land near the river is wholly given over to agriculture, while a modern settlement covers the central part. Near the north-west tip of the island there are two parallel walls of *jalous* and decaying mud brick, heavily overgrown and in rather ruinous condition, belonging to a structure (a fort??), dating to the Mahdiya according to local informants (Plate 7). All that remains of this now extremely fragmentary structure are two parallel walls some 30m apart. The only reason to propose that there



Plate 7. The better preserved of the two pre-modern walls on Kurgus Island.

may once have been a fort here (apart from local tradition) is the location, very near the current northern corner of the island, in an area that would normally not have been suitable for ordinary dwellings, being too close to the river (danger of floods, which demonstrably have damaged the structure). Within the modern village there survive a few older houses, some in ruins, with high ceilings and verandas that date at least as far back as the British period, such as the *Omdab's* house (cf. Abdelrahman Ali Mohamed *et al.* 2014, 85, fig. 102). We walked the length of the island, but only noted a post-Medieval sherd scatter in the central part, without evidence for associated structures.

### Discussion

Disturbances/modern day grave-robbing was noted in many areas visited, and two men 'surveying' with metal detectors were encountered (Plate 8). They claimed not to find much, and when we met them they were walking across country, not specifically targeting the cemeteries. Across the whole area there are also traces of the topsoil having been scraped off, to make work easier for the metal detectors. About 3km north



Plate 8. Metal detectorist with the *Hagr el-Merwa* in the background.



east of KRG1 a very deep cutting was found (Plate 9), which at first was thought to be part of exploratory works related to the planned Degash dam (some 5km downstream of Kurgus), but we now interpret the deep trench as another instance of gold mining, albeit on a much larger scale than usual.



*Plate 9. Deep cutting 3km north east of KRG1.*

More serious damage to the ancient landscape was noted on the west bank where several tumuli had been half-sectioned by means of a bulldozer or similar machinery (Plate 10). The absence of any bone or pottery by these tumuli would suggest that the actual graves still remain intact beneath them – presumably with no metal grave goods.

At another place a vaulted red-brick tomb, presumably of Christian date, had been thoroughly robbed – with some of the bricks being taken away for re-use, as few were found nearby (Plate 11).



*Plate 10. Half-sectioned (presumably by gold seekers) tumulus on the west bank.*



*Plate 11. Robbed-out tomb with fired bricks.*

One feature of the tumuli, particularly on the west bank, is their striking homogeneity: the majority of the tumuli encountered are simple mounds, covered in gravel if that is the local ground cover, occasionally with stones visible on the tumulus (but not around the base). It has been suggested that such stones could be part of a built core of the original grave superstructure: excavation will in time resolve this issue, but where the superstructure had been disturbed we saw no trace of a built interior. Due to the similar appearance of the superstructures (tumuli mounds) we can either assume that the grave superstructures are all of the same date, or alternatively that the form of the superstructures does not vary over time.

However, in areas where there is plentiful stone on the surface (notably on the east bank), the grave monuments make use of it, thus adding diversity to the superstructures observed. It appears that no special effort was made to bring stone to areas of gravel, even though this would not have required an excessive effort.

The survey in 2012 has helped highlight the special character of cemetery KRG3, just to the north of the Hagr el-Merwa, where far more types of superstructure have been noted than in any of the other cemeteries seen in the area surveyed, within a radius of up to 14km. Even when there is stone available for superstructures, the types do not vary as much as at KRG3. It is clear that a combination of more intensive survey and excavation of sample sites is desirable, particularly in view of the increased vulnerability of the cemeteries. Any archaeological remains, however ephemeral, directly relating to the Pharaonic inscriptions at KRG1 remain elusive.

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## Appendix 1. Sites located and visited in the course of the 2012 survey

*KA* = Kerma Ancien, *KM* = Kerma Moyen, *KC* = Kerma Classique, *OES* = ostrich egg shell, *WM* = wheel made, *HM* = handmade, *BS* = body sherd, *Fab* = Fabric, referring to Northern Dongola Reach fabrics (Welsby Sjöström 2001a, 230-238).  
*Tumuli types referred to are explained in Welsby Sjöström 2001b, 61-63; 2003, 60).*

KRG		
	<b>East Bank</b>	
1	Previously recorded	Hagr el-Merwa
2	Previously recorded	Kurgus Fort
3	Previously recorded	Tumuli cemetery
4	Previously recorded	Tumuli cemetery
5	Previously recorded	Tumuli cemetery
6	Previously recorded	Tumuli cemetery
7	Previously recorded	Indistinct settlement site and one tumulus
8	Previously recorded	Tumuli cemetery
9	19° 14.043' N 33° 28.652' E	Small white quartz outcrop to the east of the Hagr el-Merwa.
10	19° 14.084' N 33° 28.720' E	Sherd with <i>KC</i> style basketry impression by possible mud-brick building
11	19° 14.086' N 33° 28.721' E	Pot scatter
12	19° 14.234' N 33° 29.063' E	White quartz grinding bases near railway track (Plate 4)
13	19° 14.189' N 33° 29.111' E	Pot scatter with Kerma-like sherds
14	19° 14.152' N 33° 29.162' E	Upcast from field clearance: 1 <i>WM</i> ribbed amphora <i>BS</i> , <i>NDRS Fab</i> 68; 1 <i>HM</i> bowl, Nile silt, Pan-Grave like decoration black top (Plates 2 and 3).
15	19° 13.862' N 33° 28.941' E	Pottery at site disturbed by bulldozed field clearance east of dig house. Post-Meroitic(?) but note sherd with comb-impressed horizontal decoration, red burnished exterior, albeit not in the usual Kerma fabric.
16a	19° 13.896' N 33° 29.097' E	Site cut by a disused irrigation canal. Eastern part: basket impressed sherd, probably Post-Meroitic (random application to mat), coarse ware with much mica, similar but not exactly like <i>NDRS Fab</i> 117. 1 marl sherd, yellowish orange. 95% of sherds <i>HM</i> .
16b	19° 13.870' N 33° 29.015' E	Western part: 1 carnelian burin? 1 <i>OES</i> bead, finely made, dia. 5mm. Pottery includes a significant proportion of grooved <i>HM</i> pottery including incised 'feather' design and 1 <i>BS</i> with crisscrossed net pattern. 1 <i>WM</i> base of table (?) amphora, other sherds all <i>HM</i> , plain. Except base, fabrics are coarse, local production with an amount of quartz grit.
17	19° 13.719' N 33° 28.942' E	Large open space south of sand dune behind dig house. Wide pot scatter, point taken at <i>c.</i> north-west end. Pottery includes <i>qadus</i> base.
18	19° 13.819' N 33° 29.116' E	Low sub-square tumulus (2.4 x 2.1m) – centre has evenly distributed burnt soil 'crumbs'. Perimeter of basalt <i>c.</i> 200 x 200 x 100mm, also some quartz. One fine/thin burnished sherd with incised lines on rim.
19	19° 13.817' N 33° 29.300' E	Very little pottery, possible remains of a bread oven, barrel type. Or possibly just accidentally semi-fired clay/silt.
20a	19° 13.674' N 33° 29.113' E	Single large tumulus with <i>c.</i> 15 sub-rectangular graves within its perimeter; some have a roughly north-south alignment. 2 fired bricks, otherwise black stone (ferruginous sandstone or basalt).
20b	19° 13.604' N 33° 29.168' E	Location of fired bricks, 310 x 150 x 65mm, by modern hole dug within cemetery. No structure discernible.
20c	19° 13.596' N 33° 29.125' E	Pot scatter south west of tumuli at 20a. Probably Meroitic coarseware.
21	19° 13.567' N 33° 28.953' E	<i>BS</i> with basket-type impression.



22	19° 13.580' N 33° 29.298' E	Post-Medieval settlement barely discernible on the ground.
23	19° 14.365' N 33° 29.495' E	Lone type T2 tumulus south of KRG4, white and grey stone.
24	19° 15.299' N 33° 29.366' E	Massive hole east of KRG1, mechanically excavated, probably related to modern gold mining (Plate 9).
25	19° 14.470' N 33° 29.766' E	'Green' tumuli (earth cover appears green) east of KRG1 and the smaller white quartz outcrop, visible on the skyline from KRG1.
26	19° 13.853' N 33° 29.931' E	Tumuli south of KRG1.
27	19° 13.868' N 33° 30.155' E	c. 8 scattered tumuli, 4 of which robbed.
28	19° 12.392' N 33° 32.186' E	Kerma? tumulus on escarpment and several (15?) type T1 and 1 type T2, with oblique sides.
29	19° 11.513' N 33° 33.095' E	Type T9 tumuli near Umm Geber (?) c. 8-10 some probably robbed, no pottery.
30	19° 13.140' N 33° 31.111' E	3 type T1 tumuli.
31a	19° 18.843' N 33° 25.259' E	Railway construction camp(?) with cooking fire wind breaks(?).
31b	19° 18.885' N 33° 25.226' E	Type T6 tumuli, 4+. The only find kept, a British army uniform button (made in Birmingham by Smith and Wright Limited – Plate 1) was found here but relates to the nearby KRG31a.
32	19° 20.711' N 33° 25.153' E	North east of Dagash railway station. Neolithic pottery near tumuli; possibly this is another cemetery north east of KRG54.
	<b>Kurgus Island</b>	
33	19° 12.888' N 33° 29.064' E	'Mahdiya period walls' (Plate 7). c. 15m long, 0.8-1.2m thick. The 2 walls, approximately east-west and parallel, are c. 30m apart, the coordinates given are of the south wall. The north wall is badly collapsed, at 19° 12.907' N 33° 29.063' E.
34	19° 12.696' N 33° 29.532' E	On centre of the island, a square raised area (formerly fields?) with a Post-Medieval sherd scatter.
	<b>West Bank</b>	
35	19° 13.022' N 33° 28.337' E	Robbed Christian vaulted red-brick tomb (Plate 9) on hillock above cemetery with indistinct mounds to the west of the cultivation. <i>Qadus</i> rim, WM.
36	19° 13.054' N 33° 28.378' E	Cemetery below KRG35. BS Fab 48 (a Post-Medieval fabric) with soapy schist inclusions found among the indistinct tumuli.
37	19° 12.953' N 33° 28.435' E	Unusual penannular bank with significant central mound, entrance roughly facing south east. Suggestion of a causeway (possibly robbing activity opposite 'entrance'). Also suggestion of two additional burials between bank and ditch. Top cleared of stone with modern(?) reposition of quartz in 2 lines.
38	19° 12.550' N 33° 28.889' E	Small cemetery c. 10 tumuli to west of modern cultivation, near modern village houses. Small low sub-circular mounds of type T1 with brown quartz; also some traces of brick. Quartz rubber noted by one of the tumuli.
39	Coordinates missing	Mahdiya fort, perimeter walls c. 55m north-south x 45m east-west, some 50m from Nile. Irregularly spaced loopholes in the mud-brick wall 2-3m apart on west face (Plate 5). Wall c. 1m thick. South wall largely destroyed/assimilated into modern houses; east wall largely destroyed. Date plantation now within fort.
40	19° 12.322' N 33° 29.851' E	Qubbat Abu Gezan by modern cemetery (extending south west of <i>qubba</i> ), some graves with large stone stele. Black upright wedge-shaped stone on low mound nearby (Plate 6).
41	19° 11.505' N 33° 30.191' E	Low lying type T6? tumuli, covered in riverine pebbles, not obviously robbed.
42	19° 10.905' N 33° 29.849' E	The tumuli are gravel covered and of very large diameters 15-8m and c. 1.5m high. Abraded NDRS Fab 12 with mica; 2 Neolithic BS. One has a very abraded edge – re-used?
43	19° 11.553' N 33° 29.503' E	Similar tumuli to those at KRG42. Approx. 100 tumuli, most of which probably robbed in antiquity.
44	19° 13.186' N 33° 27.952' E	Modern? Muslim graves and Fab 48 sherds. An assortment of slightly indistinct graves, most obvious are sub-rectangular, c. 2m east-west and 1.5m north-south. Covered in quartzite stones c. 300 x 250 x 250mm. Also 3 or 4 less distinct graves occupying ridge. Sherd of Medieval <i>doka</i> .
45	19° 13.278' N 33° 27.821' E	Gravel-covered type T6 tumuli, some with stone (under gravel originally?). Some robber activity, but mostly robbed in antiquity. Pottery undiagnostic, including one coarse ware lug (post-Medieval?), but the tumuli are clearly of an earlier date.
46	19° 13.343' N 33° 27.737' E	Tumuli cemetery.
47	19° 13.282' N 33° 27.542' E	Cemetery with 'hat' tumuli (KRG type T10?, also cf. Mohamed Faroug's excavations at Akad (pers. comm., superstructures are not visible in the publications). Approx. 10 tumuli, a few with a <i>dromos</i> ? No pottery.
48	19° 13.612' N 33° 27.221' E	Single tumulus or demolished quartz outcrop (part of gold rush activities).

49	19° 13.740' N 33° 27.169' E	Large type T6 tumuli field. A few feature 'lamp boxes' to east or south, also dromos laid out in stones. The tumuli are generally very large, and several at this site have been robbed. Some are gravel covered (type T6) while just under half are type T6B (with stone details). One BS with 3 mending holes from rim – red burnished, oxidized interior, black exterior towards rim. Post-Meroitic (Christian?) coarse ware? Too heavy and large to be Kerma.
50	19° 14.151' N 33° 26.949' E	Cemetery, with type T6 tumuli. Gravel, some with stone kerbs or also dromoi, many recently disturbed.
51a	19° 14.399' N 33° 26.676' E	Cemetery. More type T6A and T6B tumuli, some recently disturbed. Individual superstructures are smaller than those at no. 42. BS by one tumulus with the broad, rectangular style basketry impression on schist ware (Fab 48?), presumably much later than the tumuli. No spade sherds in evidence.
51b	19° 14.384' N 33° 26.612' E	One of the half-sectioned tumuli with piles of sieved earth (from the fill). 3 tumuli at this cemetery have been half sectioned, cf. Plate 10.

## Appendix 2. Sites not visited but noted on Google Earth

KRG		
	<b>East Bank</b>	
52	19° 13.891' N 33° 27.251' E	Tumuli, c. 10
53	19° 18.974' N 33° 25.193' E	Tumuli, 5+
54	19° 20.217' N 33° 25.306' E	Tumuli, 5+
55	19° 13.463' N 33° 30.670' E	Open air mosque? nearly 2km from the river
56	19° 13.522' N 33° 30.486' E	Tumuli, 10+
57	19° 11.612' N 33° 33.580' E	Tumuli, 10+
58	19° 11.465' N 33° 33.701' E	Tumuli, 10+
59	19° 11.690' N 33° 32.603' E	Tumuli, c. 10
60	19° 12.148' N 33° 32.254' E	Single tumulus
	<b>West bank</b>	
61	19° 15.764' N 33° 24.923' E	Tumuli, 20+
62	19° 15.414' N 33° 25.839' E	Tumuli, 5+
63	19° 16.223' N 33° 24.372' E	Tumuli, 15+
64	19° 7.593' N 33° 33.819' E	Tumuli, c. 100
65	19° 6.594' N 33° 34.539' E	Tumuli, c. 10
66	19° 10.409' N 33° 31.721' E	Tumuli, 10+
67	19° 10.019' N 33° 29.583' E	<i>Hafir</i> ? Dia. 20m
68	19° 8.864' N 33° 31.131' E	Tumuli, 10+
69	19° 7.552' N 33° 34.220' E	Earthen bank c. 500 x 180m, described by Crawford 1953, 17
70	19° 12.865' N 33° 28.449' E	Tumuli, c. 10
71	19° 15.681' N 33° 25.568' E	Traces of walls (?)



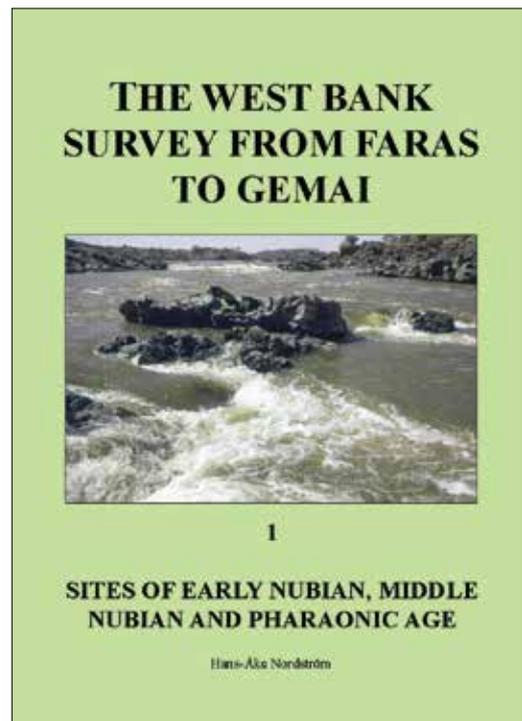
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# Gabati

A Meroitic, Post-Meroitic and Medieval  
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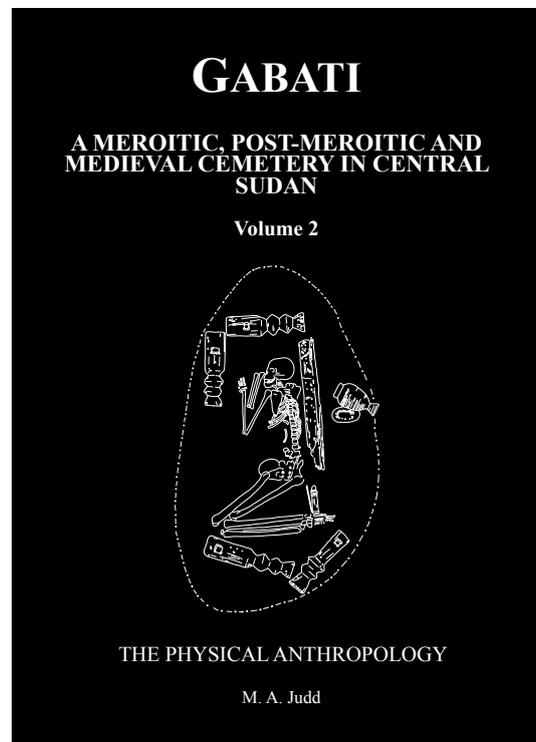
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*View upstream along the Wadi Murrat from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Egyptian fort.  
The pharaonic inscriptions are amongst the trees at the wadi edge in the far centre (photo D. A. Welsby).*



*Horus, Lord of the Desert. A natural rock outcrop along the route from Buben towards Wadi Murrat (photo D. A. Welsby).*