

The 2016 Season of Excavations at Kurgus

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Introduction

Kurgus is located 40km south of Abu Hamed on the east bank of the Nile between the Fourth and Fifth Cataracts. Archaeological investigation conducted at Kurgus by the Sudan Archaeological Research Society (SARS) began in 1998 and continues to the present (Davies 1998; 2001; 2003; Welsby

Sjöström 1998; 2001; 2003; 2014; Haddow and Nicholas 2014; Ginns 2015). The 2016 season continued archaeological excavations within the cemetery KRG3 and fort KRG2.

Excavations in the Cemetery KRG3

The cemetery is located on the eastern slope of the river valley, above the level of the ancient floodplain. Over 300 grave monuments were present, widely disbursed over an area of approximately 2000m² (Figure 1). The objectives of the archaeological investigation of the cemetery in 2016 were little changed from those set out for the 2014 and 2015 seasons; the aim being to investigate a greater number of the

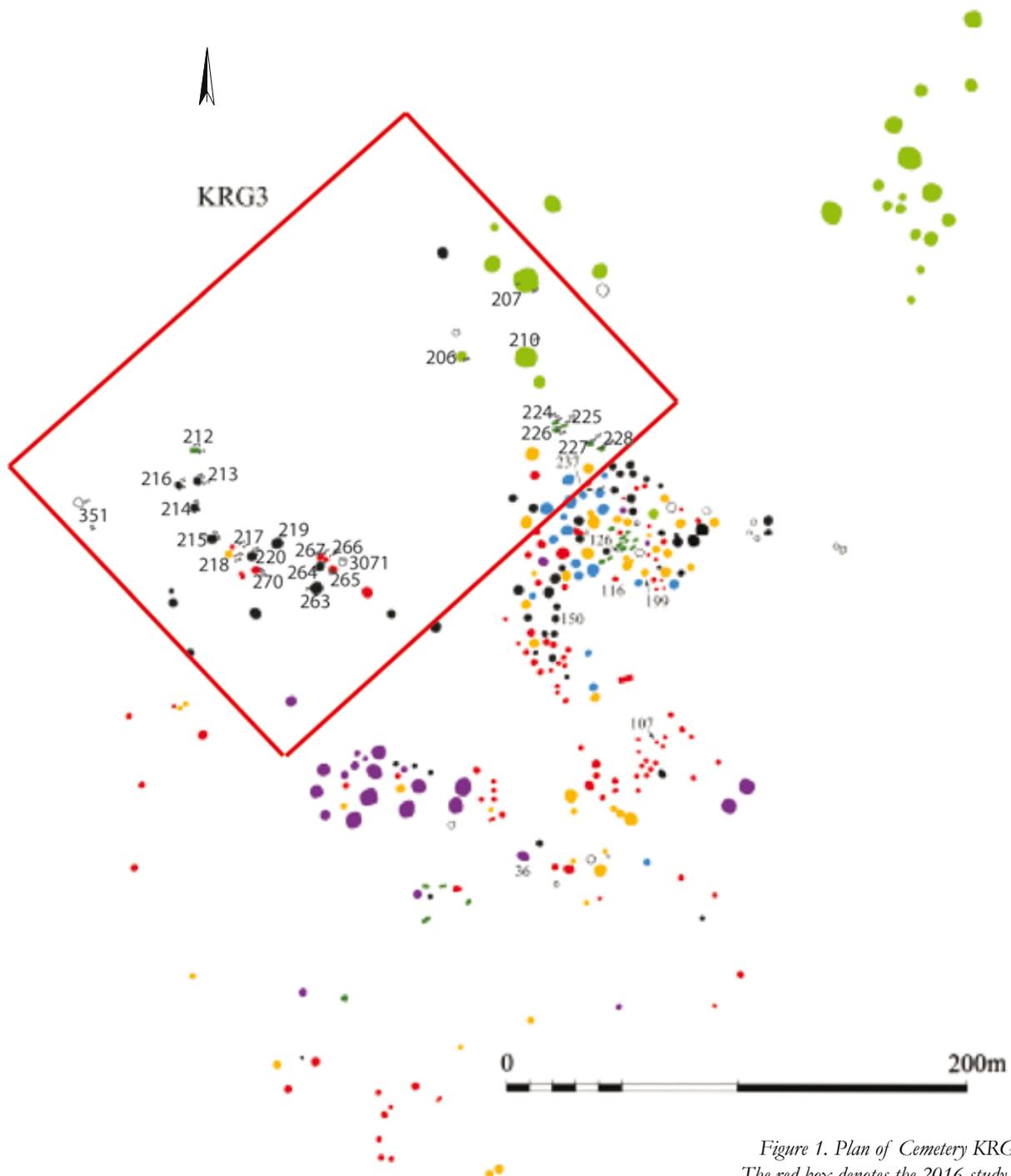


Figure 1. Plan of Cemetery KRG3. The red box denotes the 2016 study area.



different grave types in order to gain a better understanding of the dating and development of the cemetery. An increase in the excavation sample size of each grave type will give a greater chance of providing dateable artefacts as well as larger skeletal samples for future studies concerning disease, diet, migration and biological affinities. It is hoped that the work at Kurgus will aid the development of a grave type chronology for this little studied region of the Nile.

A total of 25 grave monuments located in the north-western area of the cemetery were investigated during the course of the season. Ten of these were circular flat-topped tumuli, seven were circular dome-shaped tumuli, one was an oval rock cairn, five were rectangular box-graves and two were large 'teardrop'-shaped tumuli.

Of the ten circular flattish (type 3) tumuli investigated, all were constructed of small to medium-sized angular rocks and earth (Plate 1). Each burial was placed in either an oval or round grave pit with the body laid on its right side with the legs contracted. The bodies were aligned east-west with the head at the west end, facing south.

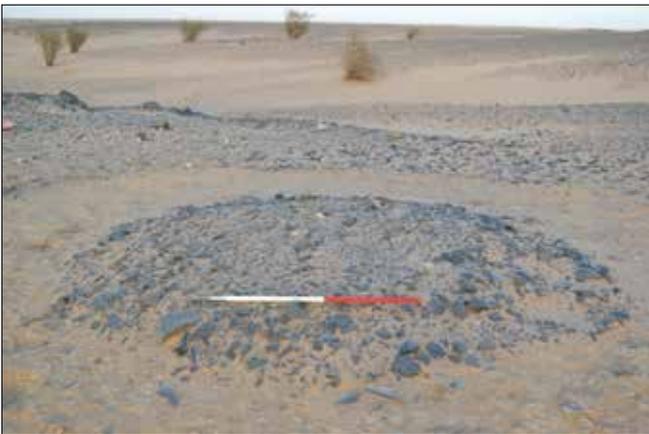


Plate 1. An example of a circular flattish (type 3) tumulus monument. F213.

The seven circular dome-shaped (type 1) tumuli were all constructed of medium to large angular rocks and earth. Excepting one example (F212) the burials associated with these tumuli were all within oval grave pits. The bodies had been placed on their right sides with the legs contracted. The bodies were aligned east-west with the head at the west end, facing south. These burials displayed the same characteristics as those under the flattish tumuli.

Within the north-western area of KRG3 the dome-shaped tumuli (Plate 2) and the flattish tumuli were not located in separate identifiable zones, they were intermingled with one another. The low density of burials in the area would have allowed for it to be used over successive phases of the cemetery. However, it may be that the dome-shaped tumuli and the flattish tumuli are of the same general phase and that maybe the low height of the flattish tumuli is the result of them having been denuded over time. The exposed location of the cemetery within its surroundings results in the



Plate 2. An example of typical dome-shaped tumuli (type 1). F267.

burial monuments often being subjected to quite extreme wind erosion. Tumuli that were either constructed of only small and medium rocks and earth, or had their larger rocks robbed for reuse in other monuments, would be denuded to a significant degree. With the paucity of finds recovered from both of these burial types it is not possible with any degree of certainty to assign to them an era. It is tentatively suggested that they are of Post-Meroitic date due to the cemetery containing other Post Meroitic tumuli types.

Of the (type 1) dome-shaped tumuli, F212 differs in that the burial beneath it was not within an oval pit. The body had been placed within a shallow depression in the natural bed-rock formation. The characteristics of the tumuli however, were the same as those of the other type 1 tumuli investigated. This implies that it was likely to be of the same broad phase as the other dome shaped tumuli within the vicinity.

Within a zone at the northern end of the site, tumuli of greater size were located in a low density arrangement over a large area. Two of these (type 6) tumuli were investigated; they were constructed of sand and silt and had steep sides clad with large stones. Both were 'teardrop'-shaped with the point to the east. Typical of large Post-Meroitic tumuli of this style, the associated burials were within subterranean chambers. The chambers led from the western sides at the base of the deep, vertically sided, circular grave shafts. Both of the graves had been robbed, the skeletal remains although extensively disturbed were still largely present. The larger of the two tumuli (F207) had grave goods associated with the burial. Three large ceramic vessels remained in their original locations after the robbing event, while a lip plug and a large number of ostrich eggshell beads were scattered throughout the robber cut fill.

The differing characteristics of the 'teardrop' tumuli to those of the dome shaped tumuli and the flattish tumuli is interesting if they are all indeed of Post-Meroitic date. It is possible that the large 'teardrop'-shaped tumuli represent the higher status burials within the cemetery and that they are contemporaneous with the larger number of smaller tumuli located in the more densely used areas of the cemetery.

Within the north-western area of the cemetery was a

single example of a rock cairn of oval-shaped plan (F210). This type of monument is not represented in large numbers within the cemetery; it is a style that was seemingly either not commonly employed or was not in use for a long period of time. Its rock mound form (Plate 3) and underlying Christian style burial indicates a Post-Meroitic to Christian transitional period burial practice. During 2015 (Ginns 2015, 134) another example of this type of burial was investigated. That burial was located in a central location within the cemetery. It had large flat blocking stones placed on ledges cut halfway down the sides of the grave spanning the width of the cut, leaving the body in void. This example from the north-western area of the cemetery differed in that it did not have the blocking stones. The body had been laid in an extended supine position, head to the west, within a deep and narrow east-west aligned grave cut.



Plate 3. F210. Type 6 oval planform cairn.

Five rectangular box-grave monuments were present within the north-western area of the cemetery. Each box monument marked the grave of an adult. Four graves had large flat blocking stones placed on ledges cut halfway down the sides of the grave spanning the width of the cut, leaving the body in a void. One grave was not blocked with stones. All the burials were in extended supine positions, heads to the west, within deep and narrow east-west aligned grave cuts.

It is possible that the box-grave burials within the cemetery date from the initial Christian phase where the local population continued to use their traditional cemetery even though their religious beliefs had changed. The proportionately small number of Christian graves in comparison to that of the tumuli graves suggests that the cemetery was used for only a relatively short time into the Christian period assuming that the local population numbers had remained more or less constant.

Grave Catalogue

Type 1 tumuli – dome-shaped

Feature 212. Tumulus constructed of medium to very large angular rocks and earth. The body of a child had been laid on its side with the legs contracted within a shallow depression in the natural bedrock formation.

Feature 217. Tumulus constructed of medium to large angular rocks and earth. This tumulus abutted tumulus F218. The body of a child had been laid on its side with the legs contracted within an oval grave pit.

Feature 218. Tumulus constructed of medium to large angular rocks and earth. Within the centre of the tumulus very large rocks had been arranged to form a sub-rectangular chamber above the grave pit. The chamber was filled with loose sand which seems most likely to have been deposited during the tumulus' construction. The body of an adult had been laid on its side with the legs contracted within an oval grave pit. The body of a neonate was present above the lower legs.

Feature 265. Tumulus constructed of medium to very large angular rocks and earth. Within the centre of the tumulus very large rocks had been arranged to form a chamber above the grave pit. The chamber was filled with loose sand rather than the earth used elsewhere in the tumulus construction. The chamber was roofed with large flat stones. The burial had been disturbed with only a few bone fragments remaining.

Feature 266. Tumulus constructed of medium to very large angular rocks and earth. The centre of the tumulus overlying the grave was constructed of large angular rocks. The body of a child had been laid on its side with the legs contracted within an oval grave pit.

Feature 267. Tumulus constructed of medium to very large angular rocks and earth. Within the centre of the tumulus very large rocks had been arranged to form a sub-rectangular chamber above the grave pit. The chamber was filled with loose sand rather than the earth used elsewhere in the tumulus construction. The chamber was roofed with large flat stones. The body of an adult had been laid on its side with the legs contracted within an oval grave pit.

Feature 351. Tumulus constructed of medium to large angular rocks and earth. The centre of the tumulus overlying the grave was constructed of very large angular and flat rocks. The body of an adult had been laid on its side with the legs contracted within an oval pit.

Cairn

Feature 210. Rock cairn, oval in plan. The body of an adult had been laid in an extended supine position within a deep and narrow east-west aligned grave cut.

Type 3 tumuli – circular flattish

Feature 206. Tumulus constructed of small to medium angular rocks and earth. The body of an adult had been laid on its side with the legs contracted within an oval pit. The burial had been disturbed, the upper parts of the skeleton were damaged or missing.

Features 213 and 220. Tumuli constructed of small to medium angular rocks and earth. The body of an adult had been laid on its side in a contracted position within a large circular pit.



Feature 214. Tumulus constructed of small to medium angular rocks and earth. The grave had been robbed; disarticulated and broken bones were present within the oval grave pit.

Feature 215. Tumulus constructed of small to medium angular rocks and earth. The disturbed burial of an adult was present within an oval grave pit. Above the fill lying over the disturbed burial the body of a child had been laid on its side with the legs contracted.

Features 216 and 219. Tumuli constructed of small to medium angular rocks and earth. The body of a child had been laid on its side with the legs contracted within an oval grave pit.

Feature 263. Tumulus constructed of small to medium angular rocks and earth. The body had been laid on its side with the legs contracted within a circular grave pit. The burial had been disturbed, the head was missing.

Feature 264. Tumulus constructed of small to large angular rocks and earth. The body of a child had been laid on its back with the legs contracted within an oval grave pit.

Feature 322. Tumulus constructed of small to medium angular rocks and earth. The body of an infant had been laid on its side with the legs contracted within an oval grave pit.

Type 4 monuments – rectangular box-grave

Features 224, 225, 227 and 228. Monuments with the sides constructed of medium and large angular rocks with the interior filled by smaller rocks and earth. The body had been placed in an extended supine position within a deep and narrow grave slot. Large flat blocking stones placed on ledges cut halfway down the sides of the grave spanned the width of the cut, leaving the body in void.

Feature 226. Monument with the sides constructed of medium and large angular rocks with the interior filled by smaller rocks and earth. The body had been placed in an extended supine position within a deep and narrow grave slot.

Type 6 tumuli – large sand and silt with stone cladding

Feature 207. Tumulus with a pronounced point to the east (Plate 4). The burial of an adult had been disturbed but was located in a subterranean chamber leading from the west side of the circular grave shaft base. Three large ceramic vessels remained *in situ*, adjacent and to the east of the burial remains (Plate 5).

Feature 210. Tumulus with a pronounced point to the east. The burial of an adult had been disturbed but was located in a subterranean chamber leading from the west side of the circular grave shaft base.

Excavations at Fort KRG2

The medieval fort is located approximately 50m east from the current Nile bank and 1.2km south west of cemetery KRG3. Excavation during previous seasons have given an idea of its general characteristics, scale and date. During 2015 the majority of the extent of the main defensive walls of the site were located, exposed and mapped.



Plate 4. Tear-drop shaped Post-Meroitic tumulus F207.



Plate 5. Vessels within the subterranean burial chamber of F207.

The aim of the 2016 season was to remove a large area of the overburden within the fort's interior in order to reveal the plan of the interior structures of the fort (Figure 2).

Removal of overburden commenced in the northern portions of the fort's interior. Within the central areas of the fort interior, there were deep deposits of wind-blown sand covering the archaeological horizon whereas near the main defensive walls, archaeology was present just below the modern horizon. It was thus deemed expedient to concentrate on removing overburden along the interiors of the main walls and in the southern, rebuilt area of the fort. Once walls were located and exposed, the removal of overlying deposits ceased. It is, therefore, as yet not known what depth the majority of the exposed walls have.

From the exposed physical remains we can see that the interior walls were constructed over several phases. At this stage we do not know if any of the exposed interior walls are of the same phase as the main defensive walls. Also unknown is to what extent later walls follow the original ground plan of the first phase of buildings within the fort.

At the limited level of excavation undertaken, it has not been possible with any degree of certainty to assign walls as belonging to clearly defined individual buildings. It seems likely that the interior architecture of the fort was of such a

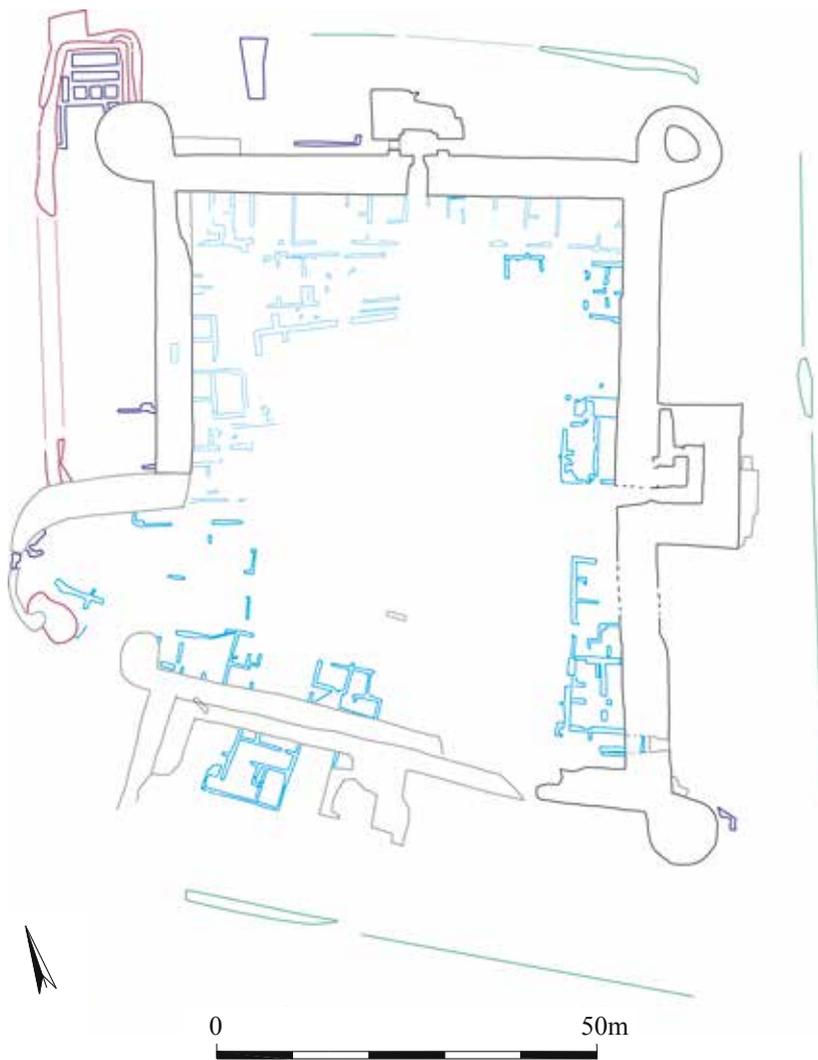


Figure 2. Survey plan of fort KRG2 (scale 1:1000).

dense nature that individual habitation structures were commonly not separated but abutted each other.

Access into individual buildings would seemingly be by way of alleyways running across the fort's interior. One such alleyway is evident running east-west, parallel and to the south of the main north wall of the fort. The phase of construction of the walls comprising that corridor is not known.

To the south of that northernmost interior alleyway were the remains of an alleyway aligned roughly east-west but at an oblique angle to the planform of the fort. The implication of the oblique alignment is that the alleyway's position had changed from its original location over the duration of construction activity in that area of the fort. It is probable that these east-west alleyways were connected to one another by a north-south aligned alleyway that led to the northern entrance into the fort at the rectangular northern interval tower.

At the southern end of the fort the exposed structures were on the same alignment as the rebuilt main southern defensive wall. Further excavation revealed that the main southern wall was comprised of two separate build phases

(Plate 6). The earlier of those build phases included the construction of the replacement south-west corner tower. The later phase wall abutted the south face of the earlier one and included the construction of a rectangular interval tower.

During removal of overburden a number of complete *in situ* ceramic as well as mud vessels were encountered. Isolated excavations were conducted in the immediate vicinities of where these vessels were present in order to allow their retrieval. The rooms these vessels were within were either half-sectioned down to the horizon where the vessels had been placed or were fully excavated down to that horizon. None of the vessels present within the fort interior were located on a hard floor surface, they were all installed upright on soft sediments (Plate 7).

Amongst late phase constructions were a room cut into the main western defensive wall and a rock built structure built onto it. These structures imply that the wall no longer retained its original defensive capability in the later phases of the use-life of the fort site. The small room cut into the wall had a mud-plaster floor and its sides were lined in mud plaster. This room contained a ceramic vessel in its north-eastern corner (Plate 8). The rock-built structure consisted of two rooms, the access between them preserved remains of a wooden door sill (Plate 9).

During the removal of overburden the skeletal remains of seven individuals were encountered. These remains were all near the existing ground surface. As such some were badly truncated/eroded. As noted in 2015, the fort site had been used as a cemetery after it ceased being a settlement and a defensive installation (Plate 10).

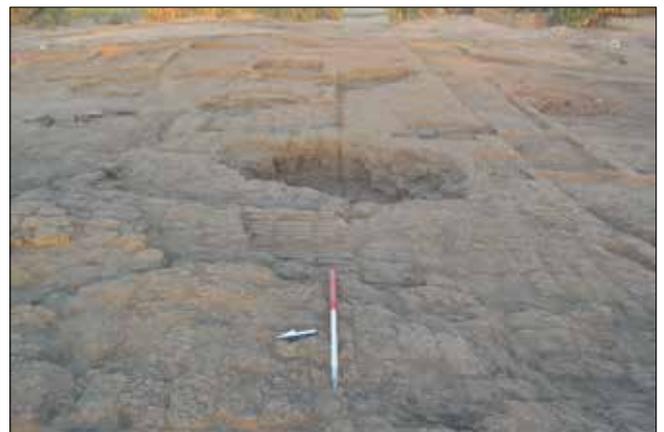


Plate 6. The rebuilt southern defences. The wall on the left of the photo is the earlier of the rebuilt southern defences. The wall on the right is later. This later wall would add extra strength but its founding may have been necessitated by another episode of wall collapse at the south-east corner of the fort.



Plate 7. Room within the western interior of the fort. The unfired mud storage bins sit on collapse deposits and wind-blown sand. The level of the original floor within this room is as yet unknown.



Plate 8. Ceramic vessel within the small room cut into the western main defensive wall.



Plate 9. Rock-built structure constructed on the western main defensive wall.



Plate 10. Burial sk1527. The upper portions had been disturbed, the lower legs were naturally mummified.

archaeological supervision on site. Ceramics were studied by Virag Pabeschitz. Human remains were studied by Monica Enehaug. The NCAM inspector Abdullah Elnur Abdullah also provided archaeological supervision and excavation skills as required. Two students (Abdel Rahman and Telk Alrosol Mohammed) from Al-Neelain University aided archaeological excavation in the second half of the season. The majority of excavation was carried out by teams of local men. The team strength varied from eight to 30 in number. The project is indebted to the staff of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums and also to the financial support provided by patrons of SARS and by the Institute for Bioarchaeology.

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