



The 2018 Season of Excavations at Kurgus

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Introduction

Archaeological excavations at Kurgus during the 2018 season were concentrated on further investigations within cemetery KRG3. This was the fourth season of the larger scale phase two excavations within the Kurgus cemetery.

The cemetery, located on a ridge overlooking the Nile Valley, is bounded by a number of *wadis*. Over 300 grave monuments are present (Figure 1), widely dispersed over an area of approximately 2000m². The burial monuments display a variety of styles and a degree of zoning of their types is evident. An extended use-life of the cemetery spanning a range of periods is thus indicated by the differing burial monument types. The latest burial monument remains encountered are those of the Christian box-grave type.

Aims

Several of the tumuli types within the Kurgus cemetery had thus far only been investigated in limited numbers in previous seasons. This was due to them being either represented by only a few examples or to being of a large size and thus requiring greater effort and time to excavate. The aim of the 2018 season was to investigate more of the under-represented tumuli types within the multi-season excavation sample.

Results

Within the northern area of the cemetery four tumuli were investigated. These tumuli, designated Type 6 (Welsby Sjöström 2001), were all identifiable as mounds with gently sloping sides. Only two Type 6 tumuli had been investigated in previous seasons. Excavation of those revealed large tear-drop shaped tumuli of sand and silt with sloping sides clad with angular rocks. Both had been robbed, the attitude of their associated burials was, therefore, unknown. Of the four gently sloped mounds investigated this season; three had identifiable tear-drop shapes with rock cladding, the fourth was so extensively robbed and eroded that it no cladding remained. All the burials marked by this tumulus type had been disturbed to a degree so that the original body position could only be estimated. However, most of the skeletal elements were still present. The form of these tumuli, and of the ceramic vessels recovered from two of them, indicate that they date to the Post-Meroitic era. It may be that this tumulus type, as well as the northern portions of the cemetery, were reserved for more elite burials. The more densely occupied central area of the cemetery, comprised primarily of Type 1 and Type 2 tumuli, may represent burials of the general population. Carbon dating and future osteological study may help to clarify this.

Excavation within the southern portions of the cemetery primarily was concerned with increasing the sample size of the large circular flattish Type 5 tumuli. The excavations of this type of tumulus in previous seasons had been disappointing. The tumuli investigated had been robbed to an extent

that only occasional bone fragments remained. A further four Type 5 tumuli were investigated this season; these also had been disturbed by varying degrees of robbing. However, in all cases the attitude of the associated burials could be ascertained due to the bones of the legs remaining *in-situ*. Interestingly, one of the tumuli had been cut through by a later burial marked by what was likely to have been either a Type 1 or Type 2 tumulus.

A little to the south of the zone where the Type 5 tumuli were located were three burials of Christian date. These were marked by typical Type 4 rectangular box-grave superstructures. The box graves marked burials laid in extended supine positions. One burial was completely covered by blocking stones, one had a partial blocking and one none at all. The proportionately small number of medieval box-grave monuments are found in three distinct zones within the cemetery. None of these zones were far removed from areas occupied by other monument types. It is not known why, during this

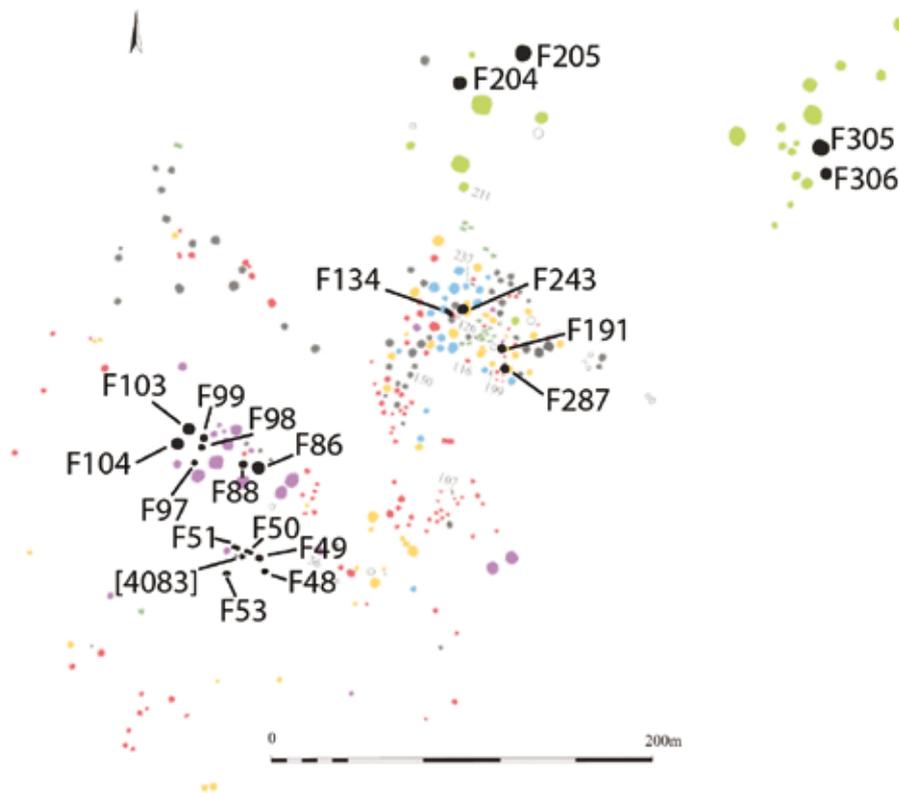


Figure 1. Plan of Cemetery (after Davies and Welsby Sjöström 2002, fig. 5) indicating features excavated in 2018.

period, that the graves were not concentrated in one area.

In the same area as the box graves were two grave monuments constructed with the same build characteristics as Type 1 and Type 2 tumuli but exhibiting a sub-rectangular shape in plan. These monuments were seen to abut, perhaps indicating a familial association. They marked burials placed in an extended supine position. It may be that these burials were of an early medieval date, they could indicate a transitional form between tumuli and box-grave customs. Adjacent to the rectangular monuments was a circular Type 1 tumulus. This tumulus type commonly marks contracted burials within circular grave pits. In this case, the burial was in an extended supine position within an oval grave pit.

In a similar fashion to the dispersed zoning of the box grave monuments, the large cairns of oval plan were also dispersed to a degree. Two of these had been excavated in previous seasons; the last present within the cemetery was investigated this year. It was located in the central area of the cemetery. All three of the oval-based cairns marked east-west aligned, extended, supine burials within deep and narrow grave slots. As previously noted, this burial type may indicate a transitional period into recognised Christian burial customs. Their exact locations may have been chosen due to familial associations with previous tumuli graves, they were not located in the zones occupied by the later box graves.

During the course of the season further Type 1 and Type 2 circular tumuli of angular rocks and earth were investigated where they were in the vicinity of the aforementioned burial monuments being excavated. Within the southern area of the cemetery a further two Type 1 and a single Type 2 tumuli were investigated. Within the central area of the cemetery a Type 2 tumulus and two Type 1 tumuli were investigated. Of particular note is feature 287, a dome-shaped tumulus constructed from angular rocks and earth. It was constructed over a pre-existing tumulus and also over a 200mm thick deposit of rocks and earth derived from the collapse/robbing of earlier tumuli. The earlier tumulus had marked the grave of a child richly adorned with beads and having a single gold earring/hair coil.

Grave catalogue

Graves marked by Type 1 tumuli

F48. Tumulus 4056. Dome-shaped tumulus constructed of angular rocks and earth. The body of an infant had been placed in an extended supine position within an oval grave cut.

F98. Tumulus 4064. Circular tumulus constructed of angular rocks and earth. The body of an infant had been placed within an oval grave cut. The burial had been disturbed with only fragments of skull remaining.

F88. Tumulus 4088. Dome-shaped tumulus constructed of angular rocks and earth. Within the centre of the tumulus very large sub-rectangular rocks had been arranged to form a rectangular chamber above the grave pit. The capping rocks

of the chamber had been dislodged during a grave robbing event. The body of an adult had been placed in a contracted position on its right side, head to the east, within an oval grave pit. The robbing activity had damaged the torso of the burial.

F287. Tumulus 4133. Dome-shaped tumulus constructed of angular rocks and earth. Within the centre of the tumulus very large subrectangular rocks had been arranged to form a chamber above the grave pit. The tumulus was built over the remnants of Tumulus 4172 as well as over a 200mm thick deposit of rocks and earth derived from the collapse/robbing of earlier tumuli. The body of an adult had been placed on its right side, head to the west, with the legs contracted within an oval grave pit.

F243. Tumulus 4148. Circular tumulus constructed of angular rocks and earth. The body of an adult had been placed on its right side in a contracted position within a deep oval grave cut.

Graves marked by Type 2 tumuli

F97. Tumulus 4063. Circular tumulus constructed of angular rocks and earth. The body of an infant had been placed within an oval grave cut on its right side with its legs contracted, head to the south-west.

F191. Tumulus 4134. Circular tumulus constructed of angular rocks and earth. The burial had been disturbed. The body had been dragged from its original location, resting on its right side within the robber pit fills.

Graves marked by possible Type 1 or Type 2 tumuli

F86. Type 1/2 Tumulus 4169. Irregular-shaped tumulus of angular rocks and earth constructed over the centre of tumulus 4113 (Plate 1). The original form of the tumulus had been destroyed by robbing activity. The body of an adult had been placed on its right side, head to the west, with its legs contracted within an oval grave cut (Plate 2). The skull of the burial had been damaged by the robbing activity. This grave truncated the grave under tumulus 4113.



Plate 1. Feature 86 Type 1/2 tumulus 4169 cut through the centre of Type 5 tumulus 4113.

F287. Type 1/2 Tumulus 4172. Tumulus constructed of angular rocks and earth (Plate 3). The original form of the tumulus is unknown having been affected by the later construction of tumulus 4133 which overlay it. The construction materials



Plate 2. Burials of feature 86. Burial under tumulus 4169 with the truncated remnants of the burial under tumulus 4113.

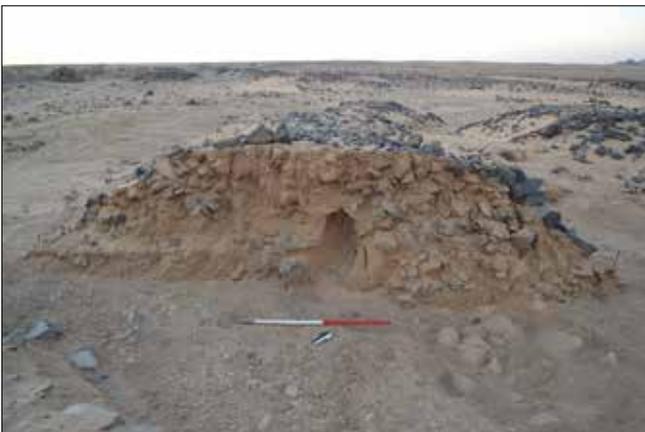


Plate 3. Section through feature 287. Tumulus 4133 constructed over the remnants of tumulus 4172 (right side) and layer of rocks and earth derived from the collapse/robbing of earlier tumuli (left side). The circular grave cut of tumulus 4172 is visible in the right foreground.

of the tumuli suggest it would have been of Type 1 or Type 2. The body of a child had been placed on its back, head to the east with the legs semi-contracted within a circular grave cut. The burial had a necklace as well as two separate sets of beads strung about the waist. Under the skull a gold earring/hair coil was found (Plate 4).



Plate 4. Gold earring / hair coil from burial feature 287 tumulus 4172.

Graves marked by Type 4 box graves

F51. Box grave 4042. Rectangular box-grave monument, the sides constructed of medium and large angular rocks with the interior filled by smaller rocks and earth. The body of an adult had been placed in an extended supine position within a deep and narrow grave slot (Plate 5). A deposit of angular stones was arranged over the lower fill in the grave to form a blocking layer.



Plate 5. Burial under box-grave monument feature 50. Large rectangular rocks had been placed along the sides of the body. Smaller angular rocks were present above the body forming a very rudimentary blocking layer.

F50. Box grave 4043. Rectangular box-grave monument, the sides constructed of medium and large angular rocks with the interior filled by smaller rocks and earth. The body of an adult had been placed in an extended supine position within a deep and narrow grave slot. Large rectangular rocks had been placed along the sides of the grave cut base, flanking the body. Smaller angular rocks were present above the body forming a very rudimentary blocking layer.

F53. Box grave 4047. Rectangular box-grave monument, the sides were constructed of medium and large angular rocks with the interior filled by smaller rocks and earth. The body of an adult had been placed in an extended supine position within a deep and narrow grave slot.

Graves marked by Type 5 tumuli

F103. Tumulus 4081. Large diameter circular tumulus of limited elevation. It was constructed of angular rocks and earth. The body of an adult had been placed on its left side in a contracted position, head to the south within a circular pit. The burial had been disturbed, the torso was badly damaged and the head was missing.

F104. Tumulus 4082. Large diameter circular tumulus of limited elevation. It was constructed of angular rocks and earth. The body of an adult had been placed on its left side in a contracted position within a moderately large subrectangular pit. The burial had been disturbed, the majority of the torso as well as the head was missing.

F99. Tumulus 4089. Circular tumulus of limited elevation. It was constructed of angular rocks and earth. The body of an adolescent/adult had been placed within a circular grave

pit. The burial had been disturbed; only portions of the leg bones remained.

F86. Tumulus 4113. Large diameter circular tumulus of limited elevation. Constructed of angular rocks and earth. The body of an adult had been placed on its right side in a contracted position, head probably to the north, within a circular grave pit. The burial had been cut by the grave of tumulus 4169 and only the legs of the skeleton remained.

Graves marked by Type 6 tumuli

F205. Tumulus 4001. Large tear-drop shaped monument with the pronounced point orientated to the east (Plate 6). It was primarily constructed of sand and silt, its moderately steep sides had been clad with angular rocks. The burial of an adult had been placed within a subterranean chamber leading from the west side of the base of a circular grave shaft. Post burial the remains of the deceased had been disturbed. The bones were mainly present within the grave shaft along with rocks from the tumulus which had fallen into the robber pit.



Plate 6. Feature 205 Tumulus 4001.

F204. Tumulus 4012. Sand and silt monument with gently sloping sides and no remaining rock cladding. The burial of an adult had been placed within a subterranean chamber leading from the west side of the base of a circular grave shaft. Post burial the remains of the deceased had been disturbed, the burial being shifted from its original position. To the south west of the grave, and also under the monument, was an oval pit containing two large ceramic vessels: a beer jar and a bowl (Plate 7).

F305. Tumulus 4024. Large tear-drop shaped monument with the pronounced point orientated to the east. It was primarily constructed of sand and silt, its moderately steep sides had been clad with angular rocks. The burial of an adult had been placed within a subterranean chamber leading from the west side of the base of a circular grave shaft. Post burial the remains of the deceased had been disturbed, the skeletal elements being shifted about within the subterranean chamber.

F306. Tumulus 4030. Tear-drop shaped monument with the pronounced point orientated to the east. It was primarily con-



Plate 7. Bowl and beer jar under feature 204 tumulus 4012.

structed of sand and silt. Its sides had presumably been entirely clad with rocks, most of which were no longer present. The burial of an adult had been placed within a subterranean chamber leading from the west side of the base of a circular grave shaft. Post burial the remains of the deceased had been disturbed, the skeletal elements being shifted about within the subterranean chamber. Large flat rocks were also within the grave shaft, these had been shifted from their original position blocking the opening into the subterranean chamber.

Grave marked by oval-shaped cairn

F143. Tumulus 4149. Cairn, oval in plan, constructed of large angular rocks. The body of an adult had been laid in an extended supine position within a deep and narrow, east-west aligned, grave cut, head to the east. The head was resting on a subrectangular rock.

Graves marked by subrectangular tumuli

F49. Tumulus 4055. Tumulus constructed of subrectangular rocks and earth. The shape in plan was subrectangular, the sides sloped at 45° (Plate 8). The body of a child had been placed in an extended supine position aligned north east-south west, head to the south within a rectangular grave (Plate 9). This tumulus was abutted by tumulus 4115.

F49. Tumulus 4115. Tumulus constructed of subrectangular rocks and earth. The shape in plan was subrectangular, the



Plate 8. Feature 49 Subrectangular tumuli 4055 and 4115.



sides sloped at 45°. The body of an adult had been placed in an extended supine position aligned north east-south west, head to the south west within a narrow and moderately shallow grave (Plate 9). This tumulus abutted tumulus 4055.



Plate 9. Burials of feature 49 underlying tumuli 4055 and 4115.

Grave with no surviving monument

Grave 4083. The body of an adult had been placed in a contracted position on its right side, head to the east within a large sub-square grave pit. The large dimension of the pit, at 2.3 x 2.7m, may be a result of the grave diggers repeatedly encountering bedrock and, therefore, extending the area of the grave until sufficient depth for the burial could be attained.

Bones present within tumulus make-up

F287. Bones (4171). Skull and long bone were located together within the make-up of tumulus 4133.

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The majority of excavation was carried out by a team of local men, the team varying from eight to 15 in number.

Bibliography

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