

Dam-Debba Archaeological Survey Project (QSAP 14): Five seasons of archaeological activities

Abdelhai Abdelsawi

Introduction

The Dam-Debba archaeological survey project is sponsored by the Qatar-Sudan Archaeological project and the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, Sudan. The area of the project extends 190km, along the left bank of the Nile, between the town of ed-Debba upstream to the Merowe Dam site at the Fourth Cataract, and stretching 4km into the desert. The main physiographic features of the area are the Nile, with its seasonal water courses draining from the Bayuda desert hills, and its deposits of gravel, sand sheets and silt with clays, near the Nile. Sandstone is the dominant rock in the area between Debba and Nuri, while basement rock outcrops are present between Nuri and the Merowe Dam site. Recent windblown sands occupy the bottom of dry valleys, and form great sand sheets, particularly between Usli and Tangasi.

The following is a brief overview of the archaeological activities conducted by the project during 5 seasons of work. These activities included archaeological survey, archaeological excavation, protection and restoration, and site management.

Archaeological Survey

An area of 760km² was surveyed between ed-Debba and the Merowe Dam site. In total, 238 new archaeological sites were recorded between 2013-2018 (Table 1, Figure 1).

In general, local geology played an important role in the distribution and frequency of the archaeological sites. Kushite sites – mainly quarries, rock-cut graves and rock art sites – were concentrated between the town of Nuri and the Merowe Dam, where basement rocks (gneiss and granite) are dominant; whereas Meroitic/post-Meroitic burial sites were scattered on gravel sheets and sandstone on the margins of the Bayuda desert. Medieval and historic sites were situated on Nile banks and old flood plains, covered by Nile silts and clays.



Plate 1. Site DS 63, Neolithic burial.

Archaeological Excavation

Site DS63 – Al-Kulud

An oval shaped gravel mound, 15km from al-Multaga, was partly excavated, with 400m² cleaned to a depth of 15m (Figure 2). This resulted in the discovery of highly contracted human remains, with Neolithic potsherds and lithic tools. These remains are comparable to Neolithic sites at al-Multaga excavated by SFDAS (Plate 1).

Site DS194 Zaglona – possible Kerma burials

In a courtyard of a house in the Zaglona quarter of ed-Debba, an area of 10x40m was excavated. This area contained empty pits, Christian potsherds, and two skeletons in a poor state of preservation associated with Kerma potsherds. This may suggest a Kerma presence in the area (Plate 2).

Usli Wasat Site DS206 – Napatan building

On the eastern limits of Usli village, c. 38km from the town of Merowe, excavation of two squares 10x10m, to 350mm below the surface, uncovered a paved floor of grey sandstone blocks where numerous Christian and Napatan potsherds were collected (Figure 3). Some Christian graves were found in the western part of the site; excavations have been officially paused due to a problem with local citizens. This building, potentially of Napatan date, may be a temple that was reused during the Christian period; however, the site requires more excavation in a future season to determine this for certain (Plate 3).

	First season	Second season	Third season	Fourth season	Total
Year	2013-2014	2014-2015	2016-2017	2017-2018	
Number of newly discovered sites	54	73	68	43	238

Table 1. Sites recorded between 2013-2018.

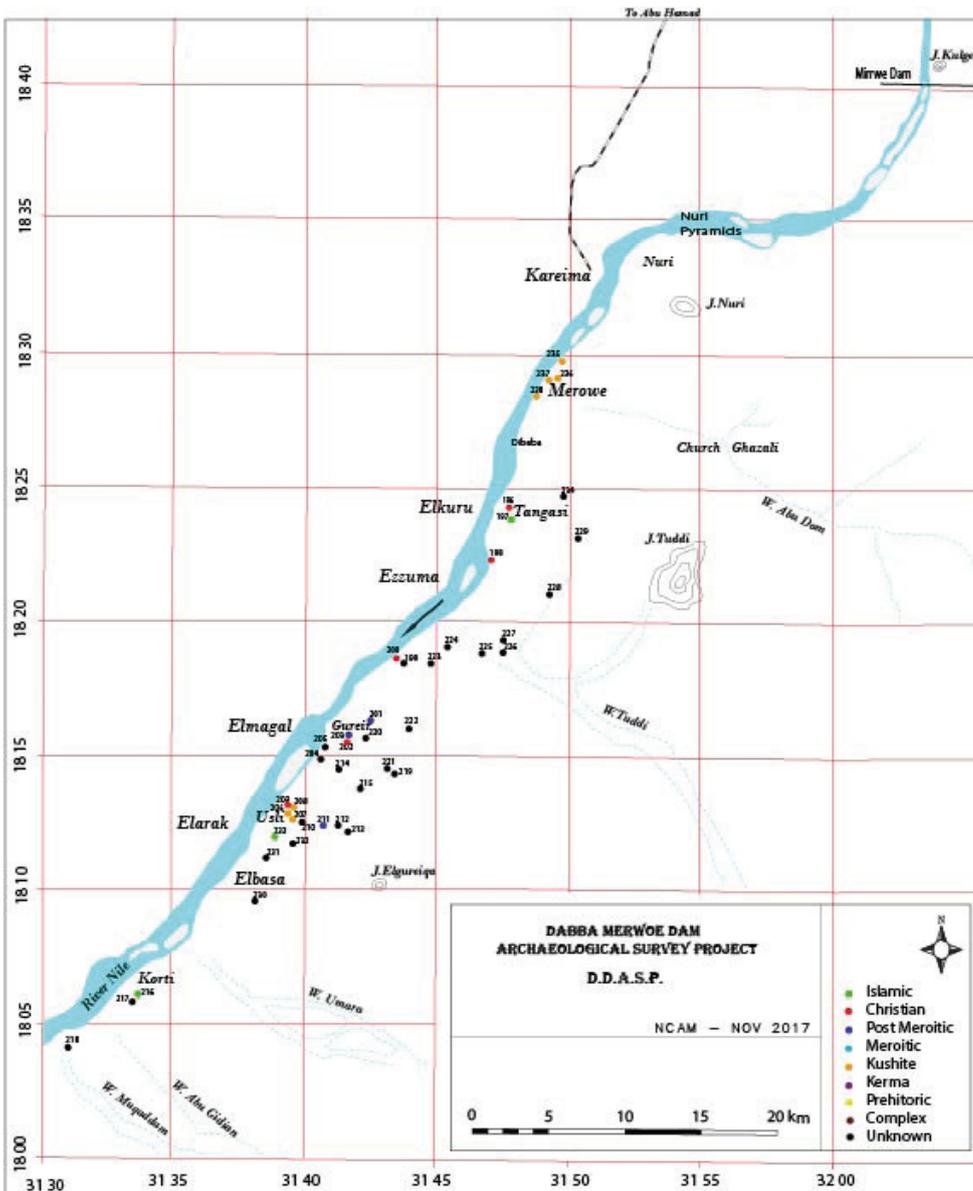


Figure 1. Map of recorded sites.

Meroitic/Post Meroitic burial sites (Table 2)

Three cemeteries containing circular gravel mounds were partially excavated: DS2 in Mansourkuti, DS128 in Korti (Plate 4), and DS231 in Usli East (Plates 5-8).

Dating results

Dr Iwona Kozieradzka-Ogunmakin studied the human remains and obtained the following results from the DDASP sites of Mansourkuti, Korti, ed-Debba Zaglona, and Usli. Material from er-Roseiries was also studied as part of a project to examine environmental changes and the collapse of the Meroitic Kingdom in Sudan. Samples of human remains collected from several sites in Sudan were submitted for radiocarbon dating to the Radiocarbon Laboratory in Poznan, Poland. The results of the analysis are presented below. The sample from Usli (DS231 T6) was not viable as no collagen was preserved, and this was required for the analysis. The samples from Mansourkuti and Korti confirm a Meroitic date. The skeletal remains recovered from ed-Debba Zaglona are much earlier (94.8%: 2206 Cal BC - 2032 BC), whereas the remains recovered from er-Roseiries are much later (83.0%: Cal AD 857 - AD 986).

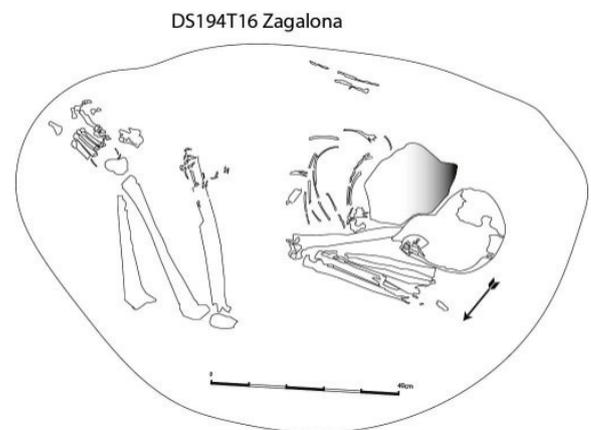


Plate 2. Kerma grave at Site DS194, Zagalona.

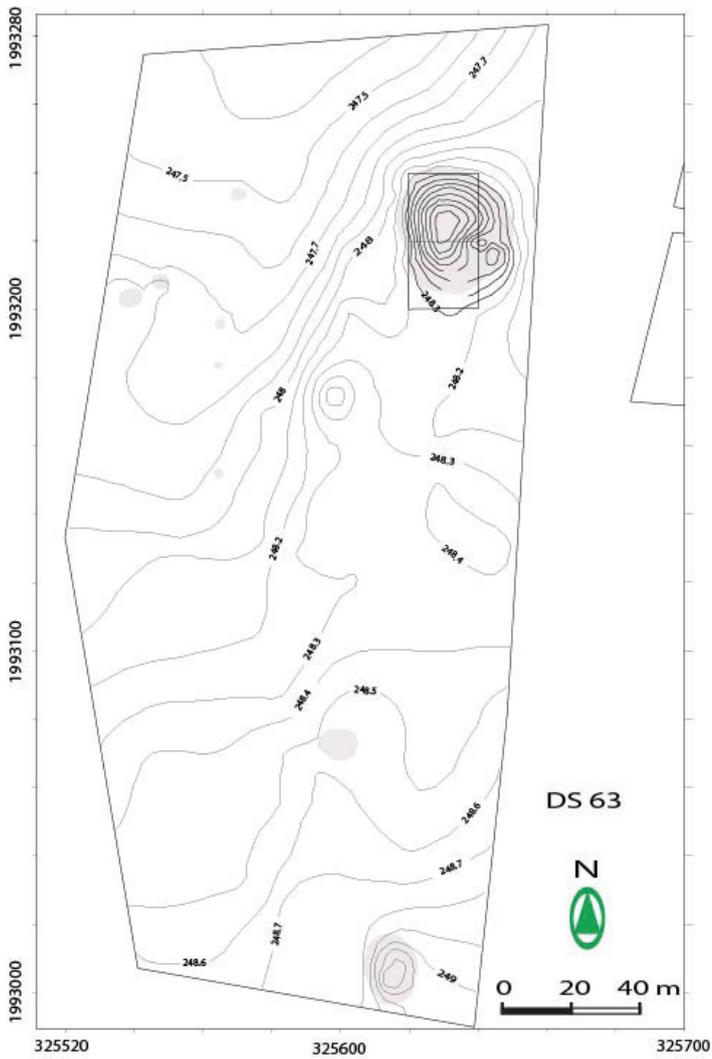


Figure 2. Contour map of Site DS63.



Figure 3. Site DS206, Uslu, top level plan.



Plate 3. Site DS206. Building floor.

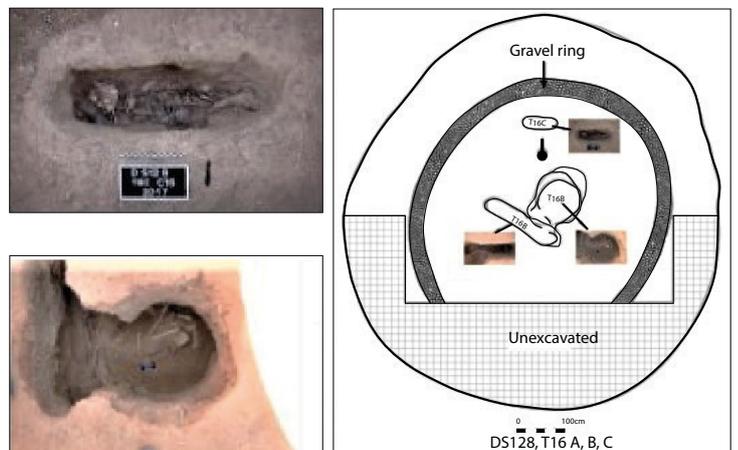


Plate 4. Site DS128, T16.



No.	Site	Number of excavated tumuli	Grave goods	Dating
1	DS2 Mansourkenti	20	Ceramic jars, ceramic bowls, iron tools, beads	post-Meroitic
2	DS128 Korti	8	Potsberds, beads and iron tools remains	Early to Late Meroitic
3	DS231 Uslu East	8	Ceramic jars, ceramic bowls, iron tools, beads	post-Meroitic

Table 2. Excavation results for the Meroitic/Post Meroitic cemeteries.



Plate 5. Site DS231 T9 - grave.



Plate 7. Site DS231, T17 - ceramic bowl.



Plate 6. Site DS231 T9 - grave goods, faience beads.



Plate 8. Site DS231 T17 - ceramic jar.

Intervals of calendar age are given, where the true ages of the samples encompass the probability of *c.* 68% and *c.* 95%. The results were calibrated with OxCal software (see further <https://c14.arch.ox.ac.uk/oxcal.html>).

Mansourkuti DDASP DS2 T25 R Date (1935,30)
68.2% probability:¹ Cal AD 27-120
95.4% probability: Cal AD 1-130

Mansourkuti DDASP DS2 T35 R Date (1835,30)
68.2% probability: Cal AD 135-215
95.4% probability: Cal AD 86-246

Korti DDASP DS128 T14 R Date (1855,30)
68.2% probability: Cal AD 126-AD 217
95.4% probability: Cal AD 82-234



Plate 9. Site DS189, Merowe Museum, wall plastering.

Restoration/conservation

The following sites have been subject to restoration and conservation work:

Site DS74 – (Al-Hitana) fort

A medieval fort on the left bank of the Nile, located in the village of Husseinarti. The fort was constructed of sandstone and the south wall of the fort was restored to re-inforce it.

Site DS189 – the former Merowe Museum (Dar Althar)

This building was constructed in 1923 and is one of the oldest museums in Sudan. The building was damaged by flooding, which destroyed Merowe town in the 1970s, and the antiquities collection was subsequently transported to the town of Kareima. After the end of the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project in 2008, the building was used to store rock art blocks belonging to the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums. It is considered a historical site, together with the adjoining old office building, situated some 38m to the east. At this site, several restoration projects (Plates 9-11) were initiated including:

1. Re-plastering of the exterior wall
2. Cleaning of rock drawings stored within the building
3. Fitting of a new entrance door
4. Raising the level in the courtyard

Protective work

Protective work was carried out at 9 archaeological sites (Plates 12 and 13, Table 3). This included either the complete enclosure of the sites with wire fencing, or the erection of concrete posts (typically 0.6m in height, except at Nuri where

they are 1m in height) along the site boundaries, with varying spacing between the posts. The distance between the posts was dependent on the degree and type of threat to various areas of the site. Other measures also included the creation and installation of warning signs or panels (Plate 13).

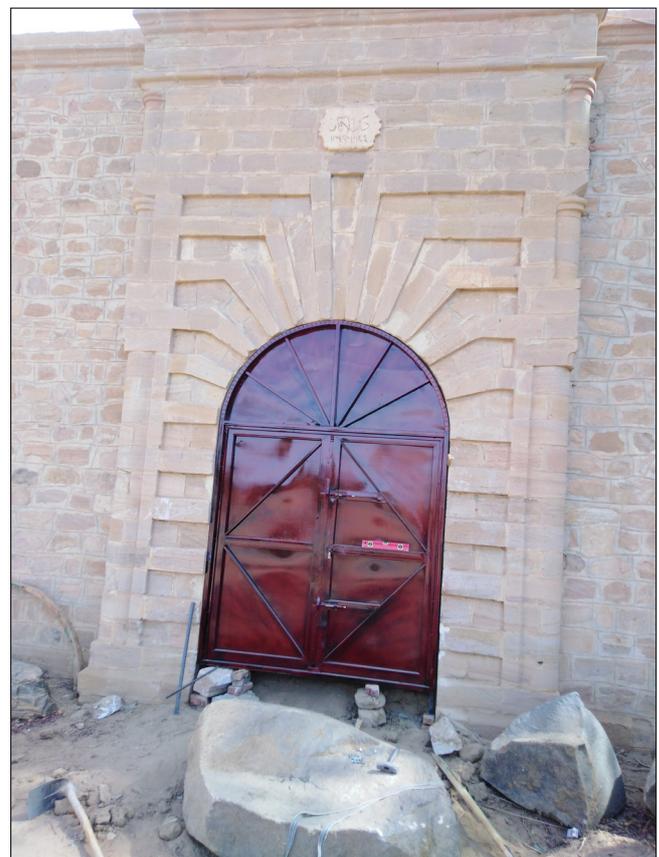


Plate 10. Site DS189, Merowe Museum, new entrance door.

¹ This probability range breaks down as follows: 12.6%: AD 27-41; 45.2%: AD 48-87; 10.5%: AD 106-120.



Plate 11. Cleaning of antiquities inside the museum.



Plate 12. Protection work at DS192 Debieba.



Plate 13. Protection work at the Royal cemetery of Nuri.

No.	Site	Protection type	No. of posts	Distance covered
1	DS192 Debieba	Concrete posts	206	3.5km
2	DS138 D.m.Haj	Concrete posts	112	2.7km
3	DS139 Al-Saggai	Concrete posts	51	2.33km
4	DS206 Usli	Concrete posts	19	0.452km
5	DS128 Korti	Wire fence	-	0.3km
6	DS173 Al-Kenesa	Wire fence	-	0.215km
7	DS189 Dar Althar	Wire fence	-	0.180km
8	DS7 Ganati church	Wire fence	-	-
9	R. cemetery of Nuri	Concrete posts	76	2km

Table 3. Protective work.