

# SUDAN & NUBIA

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Front cover. Stone slab A3 used as a paving slab in Temple 4, Qasr Ibrim, showing Taharqa and Amun (photograph courtesy of F. Aldsworth).

Above. Frontal scan of lion head, Naga (Kroeper and Perzlmeier 2022, fig. 21, © Naga Project, 3-D scans by TrigonArt BauerPraus GbR).

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# Surveying the Eastern Desert: new archaeological evidence from Wadi al-Lawi and Wadi Rasras (Aswan-Kom Ombo region)

Maria Carmela Gatto, Serena Nicolini and Antonio Curci

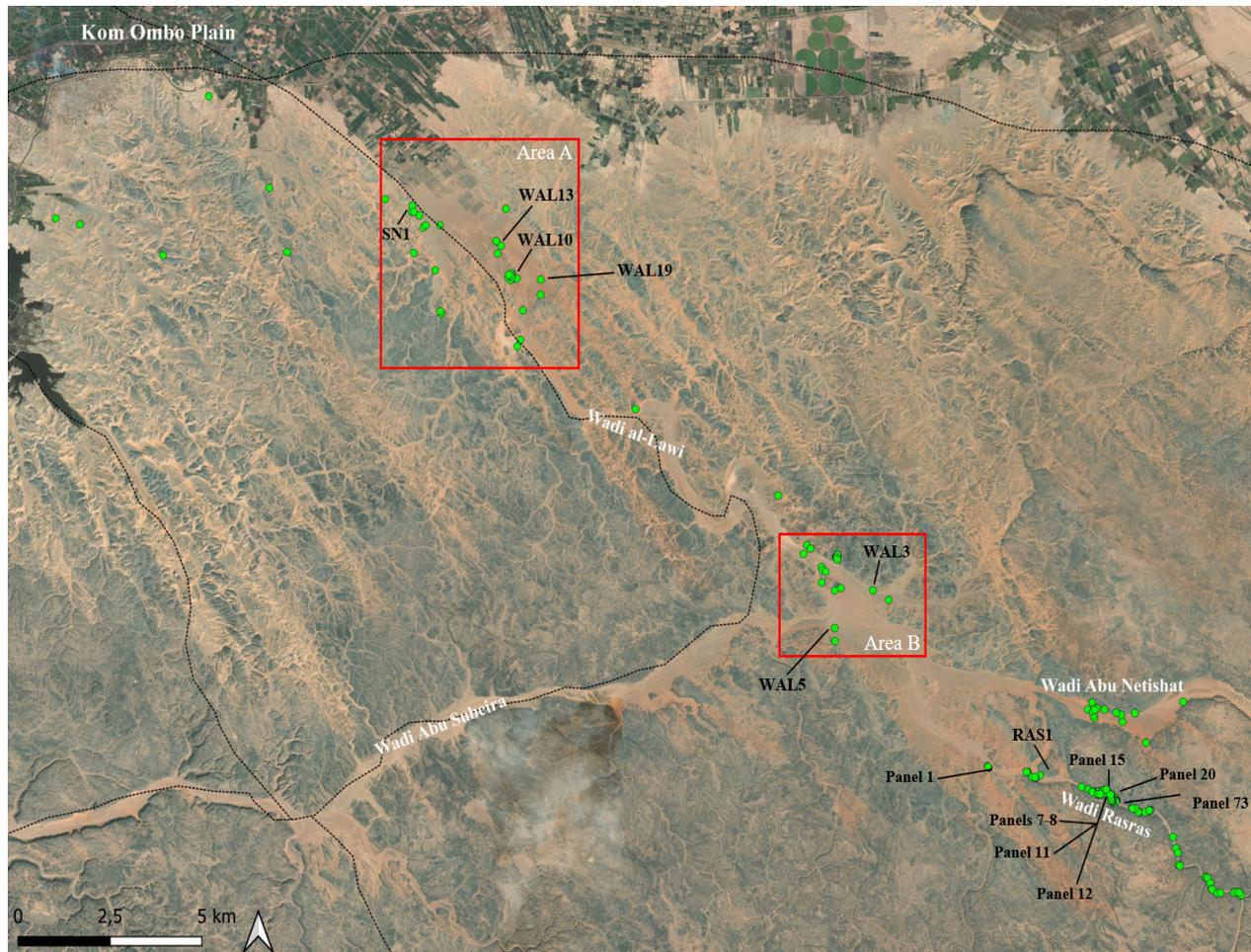


Figure 1. Maps showing the AKAP concession area in the Eastern Desert, with location of the sites mentioned in the text; pointed lines are known desert tracks, green dots are sites found by AKAP.

## Introduction

The Aswan-Kom Ombo Archaeological Project (AKAP) is a joint venture between the University of Bologna and Yale University that has worked in selected areas of the Aswan-Kom Ombo district since 2005, investigating interactions between ancient Egyptians and Nubians on their border zone. Thanks to an international team with specialisms in archaeology and related disciplines, a wide series of research activities is included, such as on-field survey and Remote Sensing, excavation, geological investigation, epigraphy, and artistic documentation. To collect and analyse the multidisciplinary datasets, traditional methods and innovative digital technologies are applied. Many sites have been recorded, ranging from the Palaeolithic to the Islamic period. This paper focuses on some of those found in the Eastern Desert southeast of the Kom Ombo plain, in the Wadi al-Lawi and Wadi Rasras (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Collaborators in the field were: Kimball Banks, Alessia Brucato, John Darnell, Sayed Elrawy, Mohamed Hamdan, Stan Hendrickx, Nick Ray, Louise Rayne, Nichole Sheldrick, Alberto Urcia, and Sara Zaia.

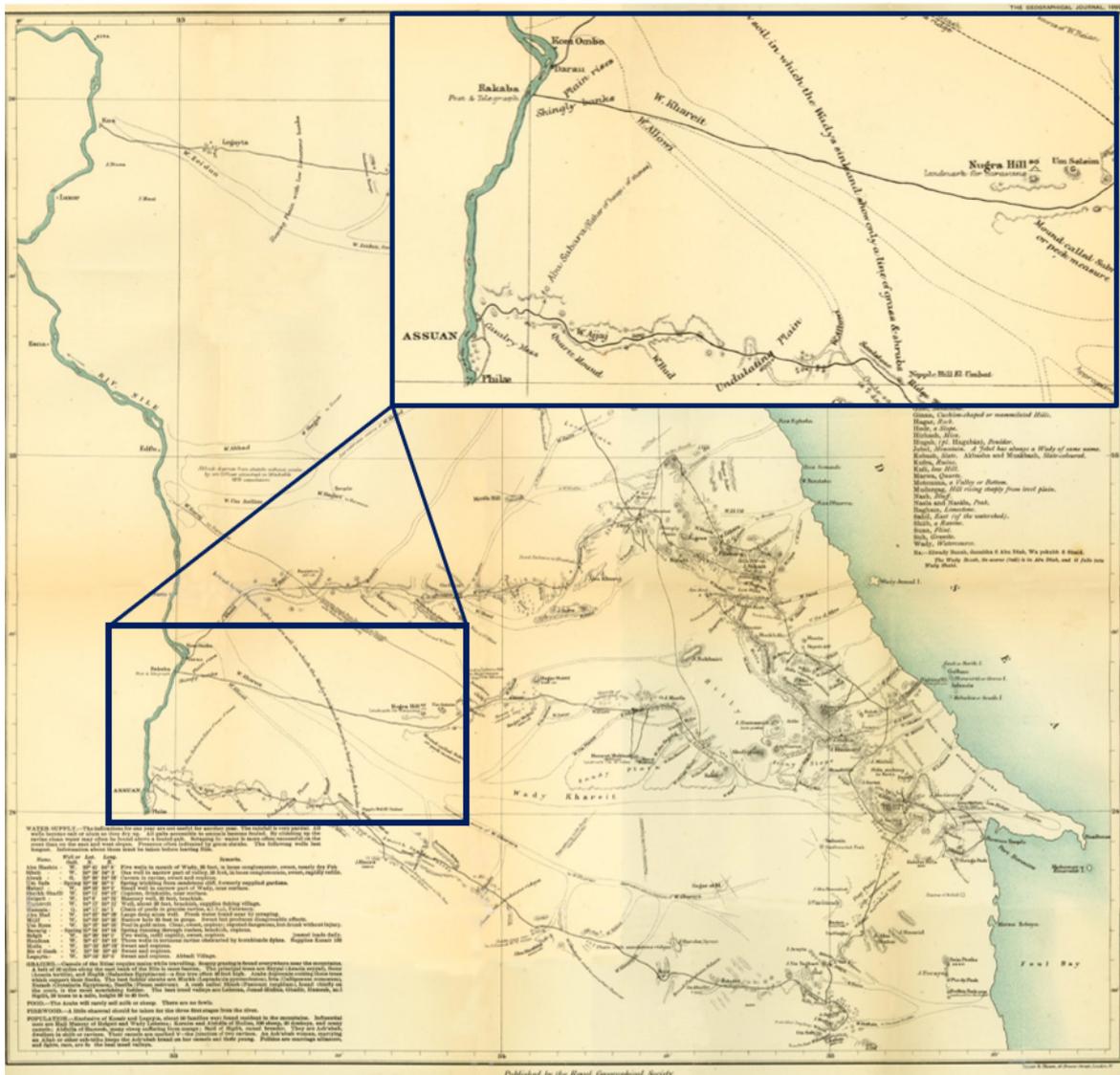


Figure 2. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century topographical map by the British Royal Geographical Society showing how poorly understood this part of the Aswan-Kom Ombo hinterland was until recently (modified after Floyer 1893, figure with no number).

This area of the Eastern Desert is characterised by sandstone ridges cut by a multitude of large wadis and small khors. These ancient water courses have been used since prehistory as routes connecting the Nile Valley with the Red Sea and Nubia, and in historic sources there are references to desert tracks crossing the area (see Figure 1). Whilst other areas of the Eastern Desert in Egypt and Sudan have been widely studied and surveyed (for an outline of this research see Barnard and Duistermaat 2012), the hinterland of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cataract region, so far, has been devoid of systematic archaeological, geological, and geophysical investigation. Historical topographical maps of the region usually have a blank spot, or inaccurate information, in the area of Wadi Rasras and its surroundings (Figure 2). Below, we shall briefly introduce three sets of findings: 1. The Neolithic tumuli documented in the Wadi al-Lawi; 2. The late Roman caravan waystations found in the Wadi al-Lawi, and its southern continuation Wadi Rasras, and at the intersection with Wadi Abu Subeira; and 3. The outstanding rock art locales in Wadi Rasras.

### The Neolithic tumuli

Stone structures are one of the most striking, and common, features found in the Eastern Desert. They



Figure 3. Overview of Tumulus SN1 before excavation.

can vary in dimension and shape and are found, isolated or clustered, in both hidden and prominent areas of the landscape. They mostly consist of one or two concentric rings made of sandstone slabs but squared structures have been noted, as well as possible stone stelae. Many were found plundered, while others were still intact and in good condition. The excavation and cleaning of several structures revealed that some had no trace of inhumations or underground pits, suggesting they were used for a variety of purposes, i.e. funerary, domestic, or ceremonial.

Two clusters of tumuli were found in the Wadi al-Lawi, one (Area A) in its lower part closer to the Kom Ombo plain, where the wadi bottom widens, and one (Area B) at the intersection with Wadi Abu Subeira, the largest wadi connecting the Nile Valley with the Eastern Desert in the Aswan region. Other structures were found on the plateau overlooking Wadi Rasras and in surrounding wadis. The first cluster is composed of a series of tumuli broadly dated by material culture to the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC (Gatto *et al.* 2014).

Work in the Wadi al-Lawi started in 2005, when a large tumulus labelled SN1 (Figure 3) was identified in a position hidden off the main wadi. It was excavated in 2006<sup>2</sup> and still represents one of the most astonishing features of this area, due to its size and complexity. Two circular rings of stone slabs delimit the plan of the tumulus, measuring 7.5m in diameter, and enclose the burial pit (2.5m x 2.5m), unfortunately already plundered when excavated but originally closed by large stone slabs (Figure 4). A sandstone block, found in an upright position, was documented in association with the inner stone ring and may have been a funerary stela. Two small and shallow depressions close to the outer circle were found empty and were probably used as emplacements for pots, as suggested by similar finds in tumuli of the Nubian Pan-Grave culture of the Second Intermediate Period on the west bank at Aswan (Gatto 2014). Between the two stone circles, to the northwest side of the tumulus, a small trench cut into the bedrock was empty, but a ritualistic purpose can be assumed for this by comparison with parallels again found in association with Pan-Grave burials where similar trenches usually contained animal bucrania (Gatto 2014).

The poorly preserved remains of a man, aged between 35 and 50 years, and of a younger woman, aged between 20 and 35 years, were found scattered outside the tumulus.<sup>3</sup> One of these individuals suffered from osteoarthritis of the spine; possibly the older male although this is only speculative. Unfortunately, because of looting it was not possible to establish any chronological relationships between the two deposits. Fragments of three pots, two bone awls, and a quartz flake were found in the looters backfill, remains of the original offerings. The presence of the three brown-burnished bowls, one of which bore a rippled decoration on both the exterior and interior (Figure 5) points to a 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC date with

<sup>2</sup> In Gatto 2005, the tumulus was erroneously dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC.

<sup>3</sup> Analysis of the human remains was performed in 2006 by physical anthropologist Bernadette Dickman (unpublished report for AKAP) using standards set out by Buiksta and Ubelaker (1994). In 2008, some of the bones were sent to the IFAO radiocarbon lab for dating, but not enough collagen was found for the traditional carbon dating techniques used by the lab (like any other lab in Egypt, IFAO does not use the AMS method, and samples cannot be exported).

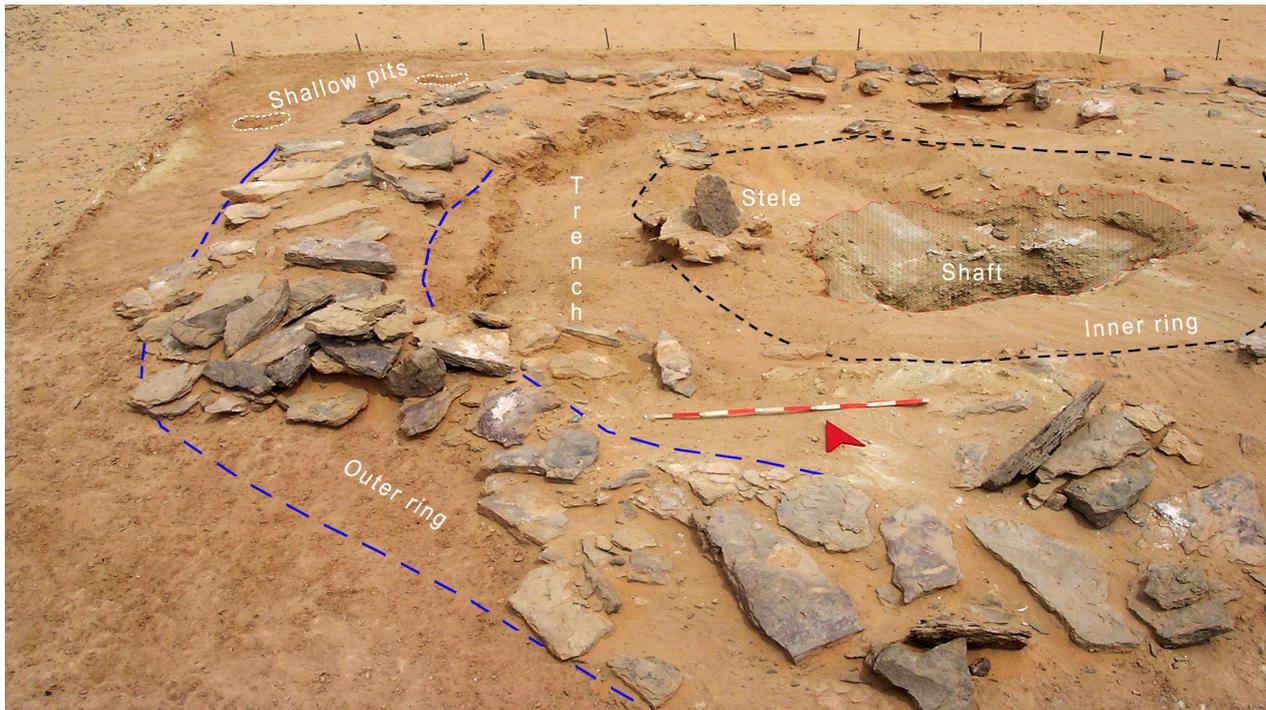


Figure 4. Tumulus SN1 after excavation with major features highlighted.



Figure 5. Brown-burnished rippled bowl from Tumulus SN1.

parallels in both Nubian and Badarian traditions (Gatto 2011).

In 2014, a series of smaller tumuli featuring a single stone ring were found in a valley nearby. They were looted but fortunately human and animal remains, as well as many offerings, were recovered in the backfill of two of them. The group was labelled WAL10, with each feature numbered from 1 up to 10. Features 1 and 2, those with remains of offerings, were investigated.

WAL10 Feature 1 (Figure 6) is composed of a small stone ring made of sandstone slabs, heavily disturbed by looting. Two large elongated and thick stones, one broken, were found nearby and have polished surfaces and pointed upper ends. Their use as stelae is suggested by their upright position (Figure 7). Although only a small portion of the tumulus content was found scattered outside the shaft, this included pottery sherds with the characteristic rippled surface already mentioned on pottery from the previous tumulus, as well as a few pieces of worked quartz. Lithics made of quartz are typical of the Nubian

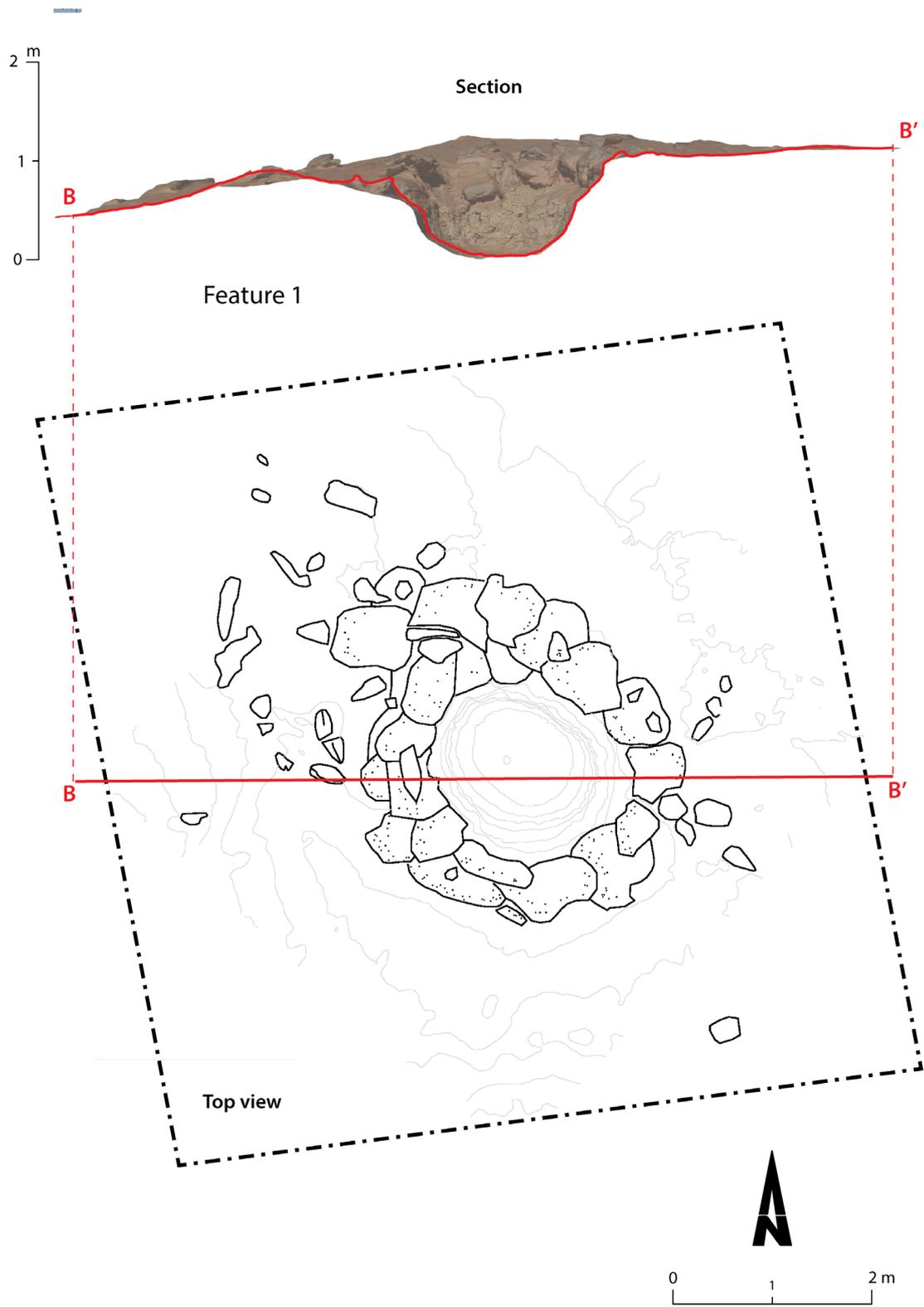


Figure 6. WAL10 Feature 1, section and plan.



Figure 7. Stelae associated with WAL10 Feature 1.

tradition, which fits well with that which is suggested by the pottery.

WAL10 Feature 2 (Figure 8) is located to the east of Feature 1 and is slightly bigger than the previous tumulus. It was possible to identify the original burial pit, as well as the remaining section of the stone ring, while excavation of the backfill allowed us to recover the remains of two adults, a male and a female, and some scanty bone fragments belonging to an infant. In this case, the deceased were equipped with many objects. There were pottery fragments belonging to multiple bowls, some again with a rippled decoration, others with a fabric tempered with very fine shale and sand (Figure 9). The latter is known



Figure 9. WAL10 Potsherds with fine shale and sand fabric.

from contexts in the Western Desert Oases, the Nabta Playa region, and Upper Egypt dating to the late 6<sup>th</sup>-early 5<sup>th</sup> millennia BC (Gatto 2013), supporting the chronological attribution already suggested by the rippled decoration. Other offerings included a fragmentary caprine horn, tools made of animal bone, and pierced Red Sea shells, forming a necklace or a bracelet. They all hint at a group of Nubian-related mobile herders roaming the desert and in contact (directly or through down-the-line exchange) with the Nile, the Western Desert, and the Red Sea.

Another cluster of stone structures

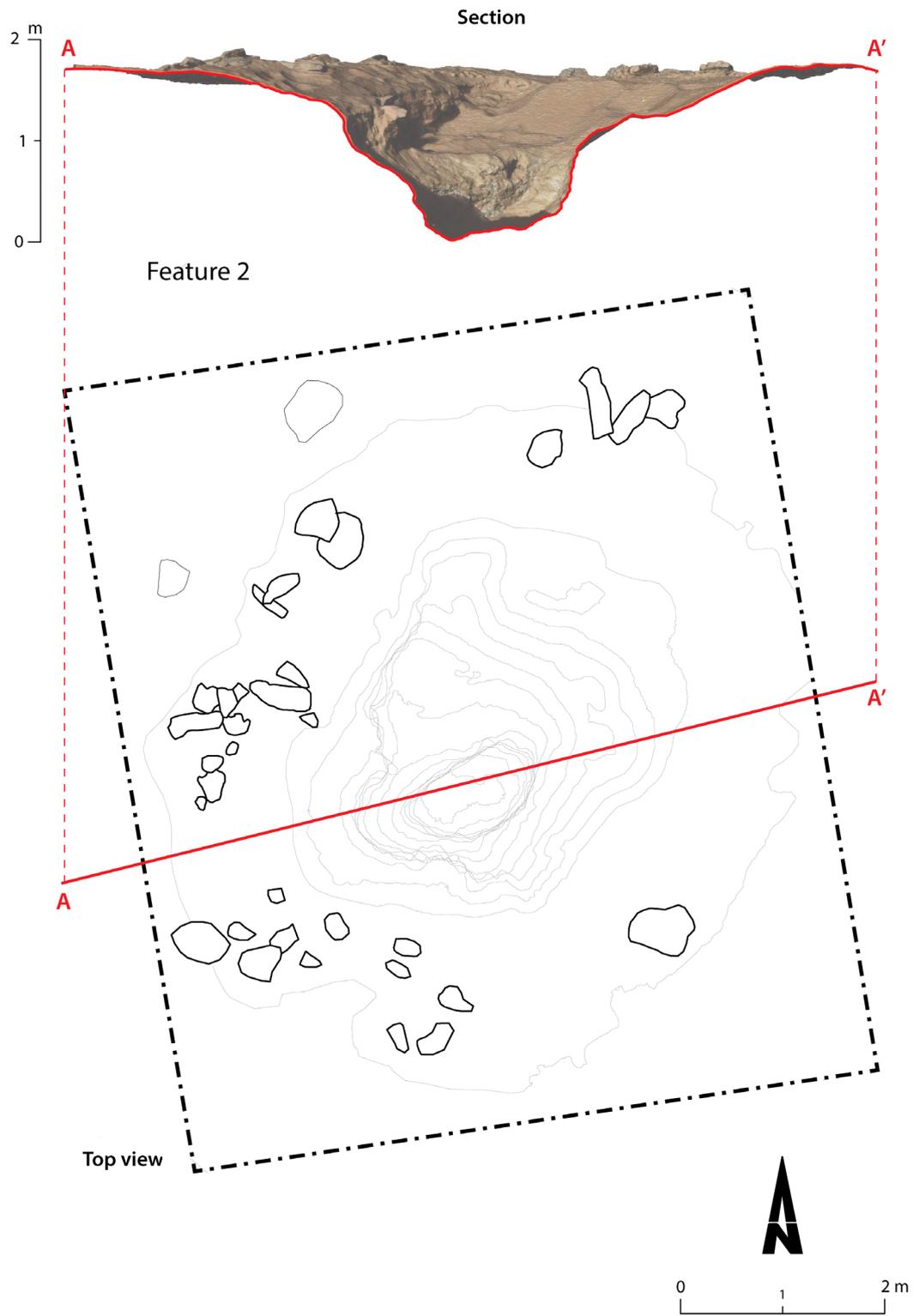


Figure 8. WAL10 Feature 2, section and plan.



Figure 10. Cairn WAL3 found at the intersection between Wadi al-Lawi and Wadi Abu Subeira.

was documented at the intersection between Wadi al-Lawi and Wadi Abu Subeira (Area B in Figure 1). One of those still intact was excavated, but nothing was found below the surface, apart from some stone blocks, suggesting a possible ritual function for the structure; the lack of associated material hampers its dating. One (WAL3) of those plundered is unusual as it was isolated and on a higher position on a stone ridge overlooking the intersection of the two wadis from the east. It was visible from the surroundings due to its large stone superstructure (Figure 10). Its funerary function was inferred from the finds of a shaft and a fragment of human bone on top of the Aeolian sand filling the pit. No objects were found in association; however, its location and architecture make a post-Neolithic date likely.

### **Caravan waystations of the Late Roman Period (c. 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD)**

Wadi al-Lawi bears evidence of Late Roman (c. 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) caravan waystations, which were also identified in the nearby Wadi Rasras (RAS1) and Wadi Abu Netishat, and at the intersection with Wadi Abu Subeira. Those found near the Neolithic tumuli (WAL13, WAL19) were located at the edge of the wadi bottom and have concentrations of pottery and ostrich eggshell fragments, including one used for bead production, with occasional hearths. Those located at the intersection with Wadi Abu Subeira (WAL5) mainly consist of pottery scatters and small-to-medium size sandstone cobbles, which are alien to the landscape and should be considered as the only evidence left of the caravans' temporary shelters.

The attribution to the Late Roman period is suggested by a preliminary assessment of the pottery



Figure 11a-b. Examples of wheel-made pottery from the Late Roman waystations.

recovered at all sites (Figure 11),<sup>4</sup> some of which may belong to the Eastern Desert Ware tradition (Figure 12; Barnard 2008). The latter can argue for a direct involvement of Eastern Desert nomadic groups in caravan trade between the Nile and the Red Sea. It is important to stress that these sites are threatened by multiple modern activities, from the tracks that cross the wadis to the mines that are proliferating in the area.



Figure 12a-b. Examples of Eastern Desert Wares from the waystations.

<sup>4</sup> We thank Delphine Dixneuf, CNRS, for the preliminary assessment of the two pots in Figure 11. The bowl is Aswan production in pink kaolinitic paste with red slip and black painted decoration. It corresponds to Gempeler's (1992) form T323b and dates to between the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. The amphora is an early version of the type LRA 7 (see University of Southampton (2014) Roman Amphorae: a digital resource [dataset]. York: Archaeology Data Service [distributor] <https://doi.org/10.5284/1028192> with reference therein), made of alluvial brown clay, which dates to from the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. No parallels to this form have been found.

## The rock art of Wadi Rasras

Wadi Rasras is the narrower southern continuation of the Wadi al-Lawi and flows southwards towards the Nubian Eastern Desert or Atbai. It is characterised by a sandy wadi bottom with steep sandstone walls and massive outcrops. A large concentration of rock drawings are visible along the wadi for at least 4km of its northern section, which run mostly to the southeast, and are located on almost every available surface, without any clear organisation and order. Such high concentrations make the site one of the largest, if not the largest, in the Egyptian Eastern Desert,<sup>5</sup> and certainly it is the southernmost known so far. This site is located quite a way into the desert, and is not easily accessible by car. However, a new track has been recently built as part of smuggling and mining activities, which are compromising the integrity of this still unexplored artistic treasure.

Petroglyphs are located in both the wadi bottom and higher on the wadi walls. Some placed very low on the ground and partially covered by Aeolian sand might hopefully be used in the future to date the art through OSL. There are different levels of patination, as well as several superimposed palimpsests (Figure 13). Both elements suggest different dates, a fact confirmed by the variety of styles, such as pecking and incised techniques, and subjects spanning from the Epipalaeolithic, if not earlier, to the Islamic period. Predynastic seems to be the majority.

Panels showing Predynastic scenes, with boats, ritualistic dancing, and hunting scenes, are very



Figure 13. Example of superimposed palimpsests with a Middle Nubian large-scale cow covering a Predynastic tableau (Panel 12).

<sup>5</sup> Dorian Vanhulle (ULB), Stan Hendrickx (PXL-MAD Hasselt) and John Darnell (Yale University) are collaborating in the study of the rock art.



Figure 14. Tableau with wild fauna (Panel 15). In the centre, a large ostrich with open wings.

common. Only wild desert fauna is represented (Figure 14), and includes a great number of elephants depicted individually or in herds (Figure 15).

Human figures, both female and male, are documented usually as part of ritual dancing or hunting scenes. Those in Figure 16 are exceptional; the men are represented in a row, arms touching, and raising a bow or stick/mace in their free hands, while two women stand in front of them. The iconography of this scene does not match that known elsewhere along the Nile.

Cattle herds or single animals, with or without human figures, are also common (Figure 17), some overlapping Predynastic images, confirming the dynastic date suggested by their style, which is well-known in Middle Nubian contexts in the Nile Valley. These were likely produced by pastoral nomads roaming the desert from the Old to the New Kingdom, including the so-called Pan-Grave people (Gatto 2014).

An earlier date for some of the cattle images is also suggested, for instance in the large panel in Figure 18. While the style of the human figures and some of the quadrupeds fits the Predynastic iconography, the general palimpsest of the scene fits better with the Nubian cattle pastoral tradition.

Dynastic depictions are fewer in number and mainly consist of boats. Instead, the so-called *wusum*,<sup>6</sup> camel or tribal marks of Arabic tradition, are common, used by local nomads as early as the Late Roman period (Figure 19).

A painted panel (Figure 20) comprising several cattle/quadrupeds and human and unknown figures painted in different shades of red and white is particularly exceptional, and suggests the scene is the results of multiple artists. The style of the cattle resembles that of the Middle Nubian period as known, for instance, from the Korosko Shelter in Lower Nubia (Suková 2011). While painted rock art is well attested

<sup>6</sup> Ongoing study by Julien Cooper (UIC Zhuhai).



Figure 15. Large scene with human figures and an elephant herd (Panel 7).

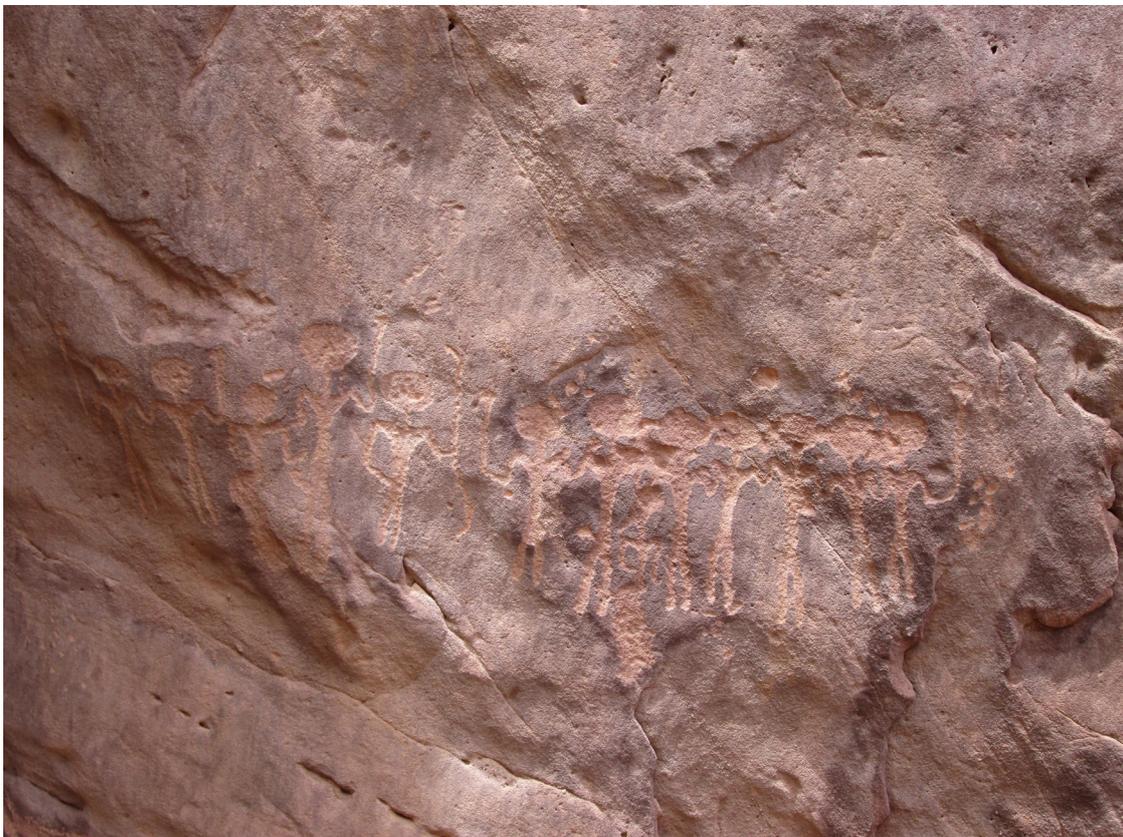


Figure 16. Ritual Predynastic 'dance' performed by 10 male figures holding sticks/maces, one male holding a bow and two women in the front row (Panel 8).



Figure 17. Cattle herd of Middle Nubian date at the entrance of the wadi (Panel 1).



Figure 18. Large panel with cattle and human figures of possible Predynastic age but with Nubian connections (Panel 11).

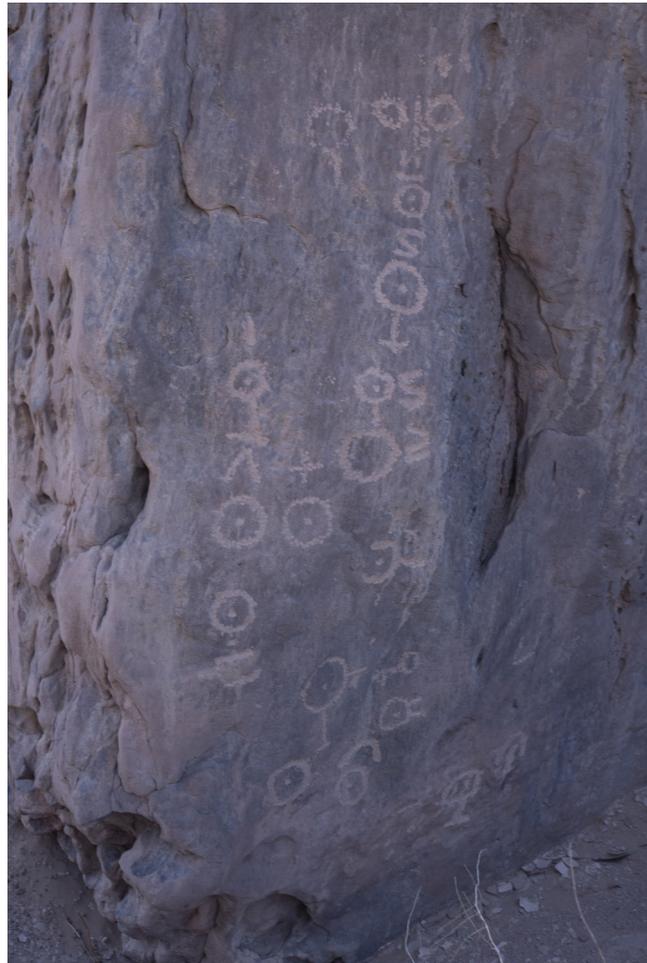


Figure 19. Examples of wusum rock art (Panel 73).



Figure 20. Photogrammetry image of the painted panel in Wadi Rasras (Panel 20).

in Nubia, this is the first identified in Egypt. The painted figures seem to partially overlap with rows of pecked human male figures, again holding bows or sticks/maces. The number of men is exceptionally high. Although the general arrangement of the scene does not fit entirely with that known from the Nile Valley, the rows of men probably date to the Predynastic period. Whether this was produced by 'Naqadans' or by desert dwellers is still to be determined.

## Conclusion

The ongoing research by AKAP is providing new insights into an area of the Eastern Desert that was largely unknown. The large number of stone structures of various size, shape, function, and date, and caravan waypoints, is evidence of an extensive and continued presence of mobile people in the region. Evidence in the Wadi Rasras suggest use of the wadi as an important desert road, previously unknown. The outstanding cluster of rock art has no parallels in nearby wadis and this supports the theory that the Rasras was a 'special' place from an early period (the earliest drawings currently date to the Epipalaeolithic/Early Holocene, but there may be some dating to the Late Palaeolithic). Both the archaeological and artistic evidence point to a strong interaction between groups of different heritage in the area of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cataract, something that is clearer in the desert than in the Nile Valley.

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