

# SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



*Bulletin No. 15* 2011

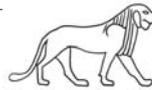




The map reflects the new territorial situation following the independence of South Sudan in July 2011.

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# Sesebi 2011

*Kate Spence, Pamela J. Rose, Rebecca Bradshaw,  
Pieter Collet, Amal Hassan, John MacGinnis,  
Aurélia Masson and Paul van Pelt*

Sesebi is a New Kingdom Egyptian colonial temple-town constructed on the west bank of the Nile opposite the modern town of Delgo. The town was excavated for the Egypt Exploration Society between 1936 and 1938, but only preliminary reports were published (Blackman 1937; Fairman 1938). Our work at the site since 2007 has suggested that the town played a role in gold exploitation in Nubia and that, although the town and temple were constructed during the reign of Akhenaten, there is evidence for Egyptian presence at the site from very early in the New Kingdom (Spence and Rose 2009; *forth.*; Spence *et al.* 2009). Our aims for the 2011 season were to continue investigation of the remains of early New Kingdom material at the site, to test the results of 2010's magnetometry survey, to continue recording the main temple, and to take samples for micromorphological analysis. The areas investigated are shown on Figure 1. From 2011 the project is a joint venture of the University of Cambridge and the Austrian Archaeological Institute in Cairo.<sup>1</sup>

## Excavations outside the north-east corner of the town (Area 1)

Excavation of an area of visible archaeological remains outside the main town enclosure wall north east of the site began in 2009 and 2010. This year the trench was expanded northwards under the supervision of John MacGinnis. The excavation revealed the foundations of a rectangular structure built of large sandstone blocks, at least some of which are reused (Figure 2). The stone feature measures 4.7 x 4.8m and lies between two parallel substantial mud-brick walls (the southern parts of which were exposed in 2009–10). The stratigraphy suggests that the two mud-brick walls are of different dates; that to the west seems to have gone out of use before the construction of the stone feature. The function of this stone structure remains enigmatic: it is possible that it was a gateway into an enclosure

<sup>1</sup> The team comprised Dr Kate Spence and Dr Pamela Rose (directors), Pieter Collet (surveyor), Dr John MacGinnis, Dr Aurélia Masson, Paul van Pelt (archaeologists) and Rebecca Bradshaw (epigrapher). Amal Hassan Gismallah represented the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums as inspector.

predating the Akhenaten-period town, but its location vis-à-vis the mud-brick walls remains problematic.

The stratigraphy in this area is very complex and includes at least four phases of construction and demolition activity; in addition, many graves have been cut through the archaeological remains. All the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty remains appear to be of foundations and no occupation levels have been identified. Although there are few sealed deposits associated with these phases, it is clear from the ceramics that all predate the Akhenaten enclosure, and almost certainly date to the early part of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Although no direct stratigraphic links can be made with the Akhenaten town site, ceramics and other traces such as the deposits beneath the later northern enclosure wall (Areas 13 and 14) suggest substantial early 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty activity in this area. The presence of bread moulds

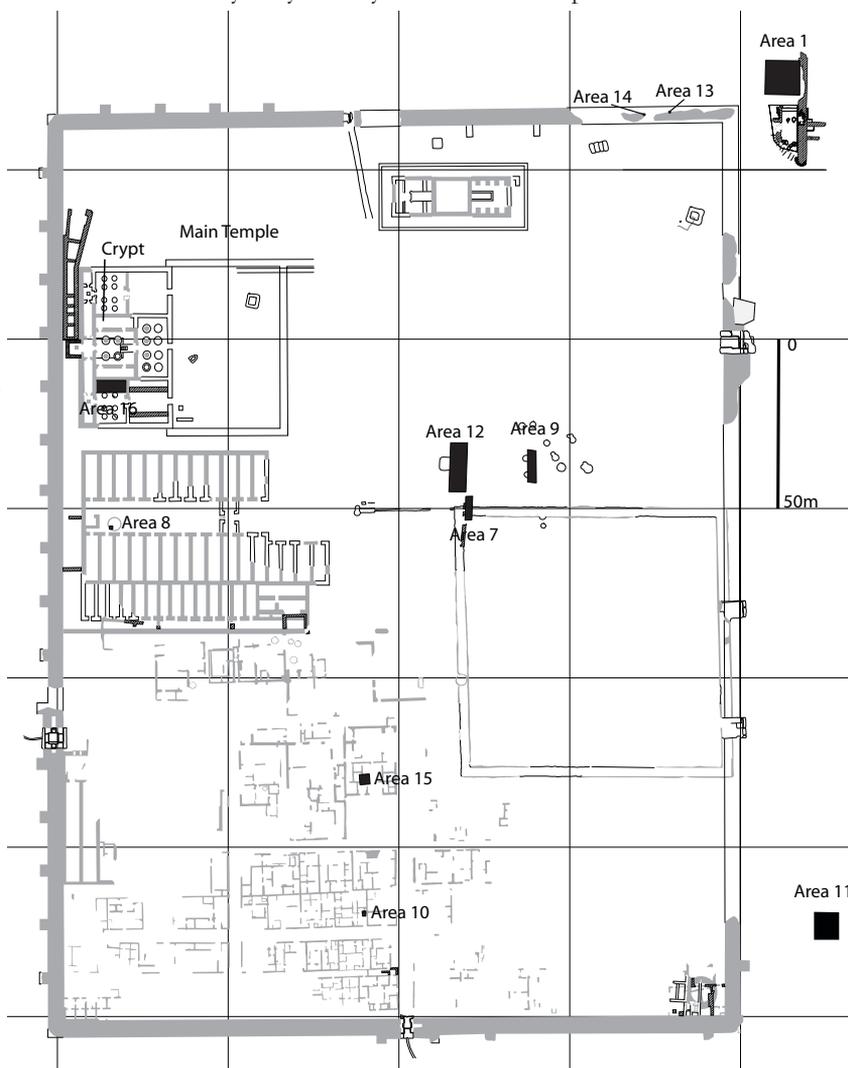


Figure 1. Excavation areas Sesebi 2011. Drawing by Pieter Collet based on the original excavation plan (Fairman 1938, pl. VIII).

suggests a temple bakery and thus presumably a temple, an interpretation which would fit well with the monumental mud-brick walls and large sandstone blocks excavated in Area 1. Samples were taken from this area for micromorphology, which may provide additional information on earlier activity at the site.



*Figure 2. Area 1 looking south. In the centre of the picture are the foundations of a rectangular stone structure abutting a substantial mud-brick wall to the east. In the foreground are three more recent burials (photo K. Spence).*

### **Excavations outside the south–east corner of the town (Area 11)**

A stone structure outside the town enclosure at the south end of the east wall is visible on the surface. It is shown on the Egypt Exploration Society plan of the 1930s but was not otherwise documented. We decided to investigate the structure as its position relative to the later enclosure wall is similar to that of the foundations of the mud-brick walls in Area 1. The excavation and documentation of this feature (Area 11) was supervised by Amal Hassan. The work established that the structure was built from reused blocks including column drums which are smaller than those found in the main temple, thus perhaps relating it to the demolition of an early temple. No associated walls were found and it, therefore, seems unlikely to have been a gateway, but its interpretation is as yet uncertain. Adjacent deposits included a stone chip level associated either with its construction or demolition but further excavation needs to be undertaken to investigate the surrounding area and the structure's relationship with the enclosure wall. The pottery found in this area on the surface and in adjacent deposits suggests that this feature also predates the construction of the Akhenaten enclosure wall but is perhaps not as early as the material found in Area 1.

### **Test excavations relating to the 2010 magnetometry survey**

In 2010 a magnetometry survey of the north-eastern part of the site was carried out by Sophie Hays and Rose Ferraby of the British School at Rome and Southampton University (Spence and Rose, *forth.*). Two particular areas of interest within the town site just north of the square trench were pinpointed by the survey as of possible interest. These were investigated this year by Aurélia Masson, with disappointing results.

Area 9 consisted of a series of shallow depressions apparent on the surface of the site. These were highlighted by the

magnetometry survey as strong bipolar anomalies, perhaps related to kiln activity. Clearance of two of these features, however, showed that they were deep pits cut into the alluvial fill on which the occupation layers of the site are constructed. Nothing found associated with these pits gives any indication of purpose. The pits were filled with alternating layers of wind-blown and wet-laid sediments. Very little in the way of pottery was found in them: the few sherds were of post-New Kingdom date, and were probably Napatan.

Area 12 is a rectangular feature noted by the Egypt Exploration Society in the 1930s. It was highlighted by the magnetometry survey as a strong negative anomaly and interpreted as being the possible remains of a sandstone structure. However it proved to be another deep and barren pit in the alluvium.

A further excavation nearby, Area 7, was intended to investigate the square trench, an early feature in the centre of the east side of the enclosure. However the edges of the trench proved badly eroded and little could be learned of the nature of the feature at this point.

### **Limited excavations for the purpose of sampling**

A number of small sondages were undertaken by Paul van Pelt for the purpose of obtaining soil and floor samples for micromorphological and geochemical analysis. Obtaining good samples proved more difficult than anticipated as in most parts of the site the excavators of the 1930s seem to have cleared down to, or through, original floor levels very thoroughly. The traces of original surfaces that were found had also been badly degraded as a result of rainfall and wind erosion. Other deposits such as the alluvial fill on which the town was built have become completely concretized over time, making extracting samples a frustrating and time-consuming activity.

Areas 8 (a silo associated with the temple magazines), 10 and 15 (houses at the south end of the site) produced rather limited archaeological evidence of occupation deposits. It is hoped that some results will be forthcoming from the analysis of samples from Areas 10 and 15. One additional feature of interest that emerged from this work was the re-clearance of a domestic crypt in Area 15. Previously documented in the 1930s with only a note of the size of its opening and its depth, excavation showed this to be a subterranean 'room' 2 x 1.5m in size, with plaster lined post-sockets in three of the walls which presumably supported some sort of flooring. This gives a very different picture of the scale of the crypts, which are known to have existed in many of the houses on the site.

Samples were also taken from Area 1 (extra-mural foundations north east of the site), Area 16 (main temple, late occupation deposits) and in Areas 13 and 14 (Figure 3) where deep deposits of archaeological material are visible underlying the main north enclosure wall. Areas 13 and 14 may provide valuable information on activities at the site prior to the reign of Akhenaten.



Figure 3. Extracting a sample for micromorphology in Area 14. The deposits sampled lie beneath the Akhenaten-period north enclosure wall (photo P. van Pelt).



Figure 4. Image of a falcon-headed deity from the Main Temple crypt. The bright white traces are the remains of consolidation undertaken in the 1930s; the blocks below the figure and to the right were prised out of the wall between January 2010 and January 2011 (photo K. Spence).

### The Main Temple

Recording of the main temple began in 2010 and continued this year. Between the end of January 2010 and the beginning of 2011 illicit digging was undertaken in a number of places on the site causing substantial damage to both temples and to a number of late tombs. The most serious damage was to the unique crypt of the main temple. Several blocks had been removed from the walls of the crypt and a substantial amount of the decoration damaged. As a result resources and manpower were diverted into recording the damaged wall reliefs and recovering displaced plaster fragments and blocks.

Decorated plaster and stone fragments on the floor of the crypt were carefully collected and removed. They were taken to the house where significant areas of decoration were reconstructed by Pamela Rose and Aurélie Masson and recorded by Kate Spence. Kate Spence copied the remaining wall decoration in the crypt onto acetate and, despite the damage, a significant amount of information was recovered (Figure 4). The majority of the figures originally shown on the walls had been chiseled out in ancient times but the number, orientation and location of figures and whether they represented the king or divinities could be established. A few of the better-preserved figures can be more precisely identified on the basis of texts or iconography. The decoration includes an image of Nebmaatre Lord of Nubia, with very similar iconography to that seen at Soleb, and a unique but very badly damaged depiction of Aten, Lord of Nubia. The decoration is pre-Amarna in style with sensitively carved low-relief figures similar to work elsewhere dating to late in the reign of Amenhotep III. Two of the royal figures appear to have been re-cut in a style closer to that of the Amarna period. The entrance to the crypt was blocked by a stonemason before we left the site.

Work continued with the recording of the plan and decoration of the upper part of the main temple. The southern part of the structure was cleared and brushed for the purposes of recording. Pieter Collet recorded the plan at a scale of 1:20 as the structure was exposed and photographed the

remains. The work revealed further evidence of a complex building history.

The clearance of the southern part of the main temple revealed a small area of *in situ* deposits preserved above the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty floor in the western part of Room 2 (Area 16). The area was examined and partly excavated by Aurélie Masson. The upper level of the deposit consisted of mud-brick rubble from walls inserted along the north and south sides of Room 2. This sealed a series of floor deposits associated with the use of the temple in the later 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. The lowest of these floors is associated with the stone temple walls. Unfortunately the relationship of the later floors to either the stone walls or the mud-brick wall to the south has been destroyed by a trench. It is not clear whether this trench dates to the EES work in the 1930s, or whether it is an earlier trench cut through the temple fill.

Rebecca Bradshaw recorded the graffiti on the upper parts of the three standing columns of the main temple. This work complements the recording of the Pharaonic panels of decoration undertaken by Kate Spence in 2010.

### The pottery

Pamela Rose continued to study the pottery from the site. As in previous seasons, relatively little ceramic material was recovered during the excavations, and no complete vessels were found. All the pottery was washed and a basic quantification was made by fabric group; the body sherds were then discarded and the diagnostic pieces were kept for detailed processing. A local fabric classification has been created for

wheel-made silt wares, to allow for what seem to be minor differences from the 'Vienna system' fabrics, perhaps reflecting local manufacture; for handmade wares a new classification has been devised, since the Vienna system only deals with such pieces in a summary manner. Marl clay vessels are rare, and are classified according to the Vienna system, supplemented where necessary with other types (particularly Memphis fabric G6a, Bourriau 2010, 24).

Excavations in Area 1 continued to provide the main body of stratified ceramics. These are dated to the earlier 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (the equivalent of Bourriau's Level IV at Memphis, which runs from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty to the time of Hatshepsut/Thutmose III; Bourriau 2010). In general, the pottery includes types well known from contemporary Egyptian and Nubian sites. Bowls, often carinated, are common and often show a red slip with a decorative, streaky burnish. There is little evidence for decoration on them, and when found it usually consists only of painted black bands and rim ticks (Figure 5, 11/84, 11/09), and occasionally incised wavy lines (Figure 5, 11/150). There are very few examples of bowls with black rim bands, and none of 'splash' decoration which is found in the period of Thutmose III-Amenhotep II (Aston 2006). Silt jars are also common, including large jars with a raised cordon at the base of the neck (Figure 5, 11/131). Rare finds are a fragment of a so-called 'fish dish' with deeply incised geometric decoration, and a few pieces of imported red lustrous ware bottle. Marl-clay vessels are restricted to occasional coarse Marl D amphora fragments and squat, decorated jars in Marl A2 and A4. The assemblage is well paralleled at, for example, Ballas (Bourriau 1990) and Memphis in Egypt, and in Nubia at Askut (Smith 1995) and Sai.<sup>2</sup>

The handmade sherds show clear relations to the Kerma corpus, and include the spout of a Kerma beaker. However, most of the handmade pottery consists of coarse wares, and particularly basketry-impressed cooking pots. One of the earliest deposits in this area, 1.131, contained an unusually high percentage of badly eroded handmade sherds (61%, about double the average of the rest of Area 1). The reason for this is at present unclear, but raises the possibility that there may have been an earlier Kerma settlement on the same spot.

What may be slightly later 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty material comes from Area 11 (although as yet all the material excavated here comes from surface deposits, or only just below it). Types are generally similar to those from Area 1 (Figure 5, 11/85)

but the quantity of handmade wares is strikingly less, with an average of 5% in each excavated deposit. There appears to be a relatively high number of beer jar fragments present, and of Marl D sherds relative to Marl A. Interestingly, like Area 1, Area 11 lies outside the existing enclosure and may also reflect an earlier occupation at the site.

The ceramics from stratified deposits in the southern part of the main temple (Area 16) were few in number, but could be dated to the late New Kingdom. This is useful confirmation for the date of the use of the temple, and the ceramics were apparently associated with architectural modifications to the temple in the form of added mud-brick walls. Unfortunately the vessel types identified are simple, including bowls with red-slipped interiors and a rim band on exterior and a biconical jar neck (Figure 6, 11/161), and it is not possible to date them more closely from the current sample. One vessel for burning incense was found (Figure 6, 11/162), of a type known from Deir el-Medina (Nagel 1938, fig. 97 no.12). The only handmade sherds found from these deposits were bread cones, and thus are part of a common Egyptian temple repertoire. No marl-clay sherds were found from the stratified levels, but amongst the surface sherds from this area there were several examples of Memphis fabric G6a, which appears at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty.

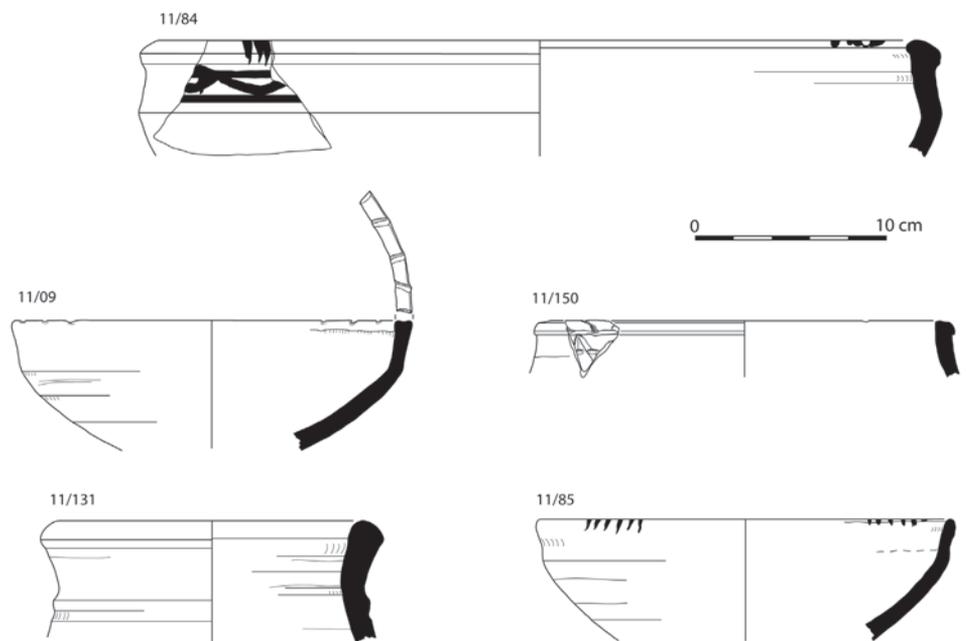


Figure 5. Eighteenth Dynasty pottery from Sesebi, scale 1:4 (drawing P. Rose).

An interesting aspect of the work this year was the identification of a wide range of Napatan period ceramics from across the site (the term Napatan is here used to mean mainly the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, but the repertoire includes types that could be a little earlier on the basis of parallels from Qasr Ibrim; there appears to be nothing significantly later in date). The material comprises both handmade and wheel-made wares, many of the latter being marl-clay vessels of fabric marl A4 variant 2 from Upper Egypt (Figure 6, 11/43, 11/111). Only one fragment of a keg from the western oases was found.

<sup>2</sup> Personal observation, P. Rose. Thanks to Ms Florence Doyenne and Dr Julia Budka for making this material available.



Despite the large number of Napatan sherds that were recovered, none came from well-stratified contexts. The largest group came from the surface deposits over the southern part of the main temple platform. Here handmade wares predominated in the assemblage and suggest perhaps that the temple was not in use at this time, although the presence of breadcone fragments (Figure 6, 11/23) may suggest otherwise. More Napatan ceramics came from backfill in Area 15, a New Kingdom house within the enclosure (Figure 6, 11/118, 11/45, both handmade wares). In fact, there is a widespread surface scatter of similar ceramics over the whole enclosure, on the surrounding spoil heaps, and in the New Kingdom cemeteries to the west which derive from the reuse of the graves. However, there are no identifiable structural remains of this date within the enclosure.<sup>3</sup> The deep pits seen over much of the site, some of which were excavated this season in Areas 9 and 12, may perhaps represent the last surviving elements of such buildings. In relation to this, it may be significant that in Area 12 all but one of the marl-clay sherds recovered were Napatan in date. The evidence thus suggests that there may have been widespread Napatan occupation at Sesebi, but that deflation and erosion has removed almost all traces of it.

A very small quantity of Post-Meroitic pottery was recovered from surface and redeposited contexts. Its scarcity suggests that it does not reflect occupation of Sesebi at this time, but rather may derive from the nearby site of Jebel Sese.

### Acknowledgements

We thank the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums for their assistance throughout the planning and execution of our work at the site, in particular, Hassan Hussein Idriss, Dr Salah Mohamed Ahmed, el-Hassan Ahmed Mohamed, Dr Abdel Rahman Ali and our inspector, Amal Hassan Gismallah. We thank Yousuf Tahir, Governor of Delgo Region for his efforts to protect and preserve the site in the face of significant changes in the region. Abdul Shafy Yassin and his family provided a comfortable house and assistance in the field.

The 2011 season was funded by grants from the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research (excavation), the Thomas Mulvey Fund of the University of Cambridge (temple recording), and the Austrian Archaeological Institute (excavation). We are very grateful to all for their generous support for the project.

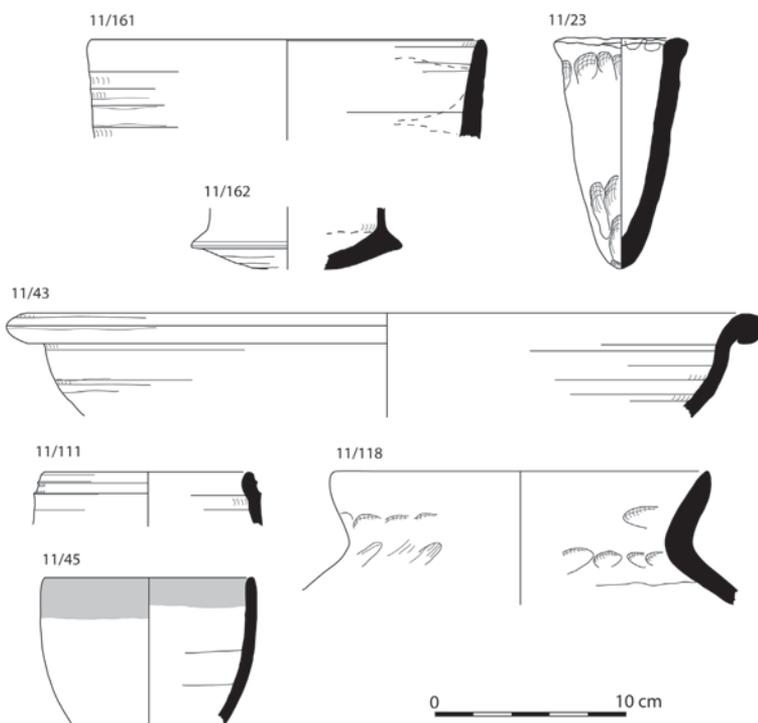


Figure 6. Late New Kingdom and Napatan pottery from Sesebi, scale 1:4 (drawing P. Rose).

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<sup>3</sup> A building postdating the construction of the main town was found in the south-east corner of the town in the 1930s and this could have been of Napatan date. However, it was demolished by the earlier excavators in order to study an enigmatic circular feature found beneath it; a reassessment of its date is thus impossible (Fairman 1938, 143, pl. IX).