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Reports

- An inscribed basin of the 18th dynasty (reign of Amenhotep III) from the fortress of Shalfak in Lower Nubia** 1
W. Vivian Davies
- Angareeb-bed production in modern Nubia: Documenting a dying craft tradition** 11
Manuela Lehmann
- The biocultural heritage and historical ecology of date palm cultivation in Nubian villages, northern Sudan** 24
Philippa Ryan, Mohammed Hassan, Mohamed Saad, Marcus Jaeger, Caroline Cartwright, Dorian Fuller and Neal Spencer
- The archaeological and heritage survey of the Northern el-Mahas region. First season's report (2020)** 40
Abdelrahman Ibrahim Said
- Preliminary report for the Western Desert of the Third Cataract Region Project (Wadi Gorgod - first season 2018-2019)** 49
Hamad Mohamed Hamdeen, Altayeb Abdalla Hassbrabo, Safa Gamal Idres, Samar Salah Mustafa, and Fatima Idris Mahmoud
- Starting anew at Old Dongola** 67
Artur Obłuski and Dorota Dzierbicka
- From development displacement and salvage archaeology in Nubia to inclusive sustainable heritage and development crafting in Old Dongola** 82
Peter Bille Larsen
- Dialogue Community Project in Old Dongola (2019-2021)** 95
Tomomi Fushiya
- Wadi Abu Dom investigations: El Rum Oasis** 108
Tim Karberg and Angelika Lohwasser
- Goldmines, nomad camps, and cemeteries: The 2018 season of the Atbai Survey Project** 121
Julien Cooper
- Archaeological report on the excavation of a post-Meroitic necropolis at el-Madanab (Shahid Rescue Archaeological Project)** 135
Fakhri Hassan Abdallah, Romain David and Iwona Koziaradzka-Ogunmakin
- The archaeological site of Damboya in the Shendi Reach. Second season** 154
Marc Maillot
- Building E at Damboya, second season** 168
Gabrielle Choimet
- (Re)examining the tomb of Queen Yeturow at Nuri** 184
Meghan E. Strong, Susan Doll, Fakhri Hassan Abdallah, Helen O'Brien, Simone Petacchi, Abigail Breidenstein and Pearce Paul Creasman
- Dental insights into the biological affinities of the inhabitants of Gabati over a period of cultural transition** 195
Emma L. W. Phillips, Joel D. Irish and Daniel Antoine
- Jebel Hawrā, a new archaeological site in Eastern Sudan** 209
Enrico Giancristofaro

Studies

Was the individual buried in MOG012.4 a Christian, a pagan, or both? Evidence for the appropriation of Christianity from a Late Antique-Early Medieval tumulus grave on Mograt Island 221
Claudia Näser, Alexandros Tsakos and Jens Weschenfelder

After ‘InBetween’: Disentangling cultural contacts across Nubia during the 2nd millennium BC 230
Aaron de Souza

Skeuomorphism in Kerma metal vessels 243
Carl Walsh

Heart scarabs and other heart-related objects in New Kingdom Nubia 252
Rennan Lemos

***Sheikh and Melik* 1925: A short note** 270
Paul T. Nicholson

Book reviews 274

Obituaries

Peter MacKenzie Smith (1946-2020) 279

Professor Abdelgadir Mahmoud Abdallah (1937-2021) 279

Sandro Salvatori (1948-2020) 280

George Hart (1945-2021) 283

Biographies 284

Miscellanies 289

Front cover. Cattle and two goats\gazelle from Site GRD-14 in the Wadi Gorgod (photo Hamad Mohamed Hamdeen).

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The archaeological and heritage survey of the Northern el-Mahas region. First season's report (2020)

Abdelrahman Ibrahim Said

Introduction

'The Mahas region lies along the Nile beginning at the north end of Dongola Reach extending from the area of the villages of Hannek (west bank) and Tombos (east bank), at the top of the Third Cataract, downriver as far as the area of Jebel Dosha (west bank) and Wawa (east bank), in the north. ... the region extends over a distance of c. 141km (c. 88 miles) from Hannek to Wawa. Within this area the landscape

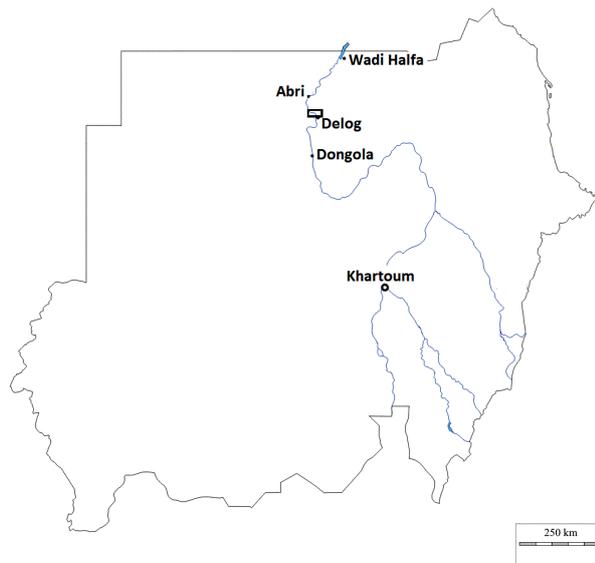


Figure 1. Map showing the study area in Sudan.



Figure 2. Satellite locations of the area. Google Earth.

is varied, including some very fertile localities with abundant alluvial soils but also many extremely barren and inhospitable areas' (Osman and Edwards 2011, 6-7).

Archaeological Survey of the Northern el-Mahas Region

The concession granted by the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) includes the northern part of the Mahas region, extending from the town of Delgo and Gorgod northwards to Soleb and Wawa, a distance of c. 90km along the Nile. The area includes ten Local Peoples' Administrative Regions (*Sheikhas*), five on the west bank (Gorgod, Tondi, Tinnare, Koya, Agula and Soleb) and five on the east bank (Abu Sari, Sadinfanti, Ager, Koyamatto, and Wawa) (Figures 1 and 2).¹

The project began in April 2020 with a reconnaissance survey on the east bank carried out from the town of Delgo north to Saadinkorti village. During this first season, the survey team covered a distance of c. 20km (Figure 3). This season was funded and supported by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Sudan and the University of Khartoum.² The survey was mostly conducted on foot and all ancient features found were recorded. Fieldwork was carried out

¹ For further information concerning the geology, environment, and population of the study area see Çelebi 1938; Arkell 1950, 34; Awad 1956, 43; Adams 1977, 24; Osman 1998, 5; Tahir 2009a; Osman and Edwards 2011, 17-24. For a discussion of the history of the region and previous studies conducted there see Musaad 1960, 56; Leclant 1963, 204-205; Musaad 1972, 54; Allard-Huard and Huard 1982; Said 2005, 138-146; Ahmed *et al.* 2008, 25-30.

² The team members included: Abdelrahman Ibrahim Said, project director, Department of Archaeology, University of Khartoum; Yasir Mohammed Tayaallah, field director, Department of Archaeology, University of Khartoum; Fakhri Hassan Abdallah, The National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM), Sudan; Mohammed Albadri Soliman, Department of Archaeology, University of Khartoum; Alamain Ibrahim Hasan, Department of Archaeology, University of Algazira; Nahid Abdelatif, Department of Archaeology, University of Bahri; Fatima Idris Ali, Department of Archaeology, University of Shendi; and Mohammed Nasreldin Abdelrazig, Department of Archaeology, University of Algazira.

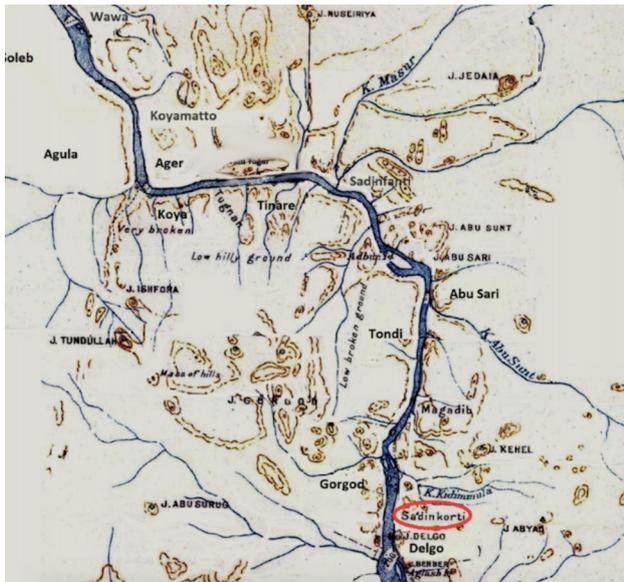


Figure 3. The study area.



Figure 4. Lithics from SAK.18.



Figure 5. Grinding stones from SAK.3.

at 42 sites (Table 1). These were registered as within Saadinkorta, as the work was concentrated in this area. Most sites (e.g. fort, settlement, cemeteries) were of medieval date (c. AD 500-1500), but there were also post-medieval remains (shrine, settlement, graves) and prehistoric sites (Paleolithic (c. 300,000-8500 BC) and Neolithic (c. 5000-3000 BC), as well as possibly A-Group (c. 3700-2800 BC), C-Group (c. 2300-1600 BC), Pre-Kerma (c. 4th millennium-2600 BC), Kerma (c. 2500-1500 BC), Meroitic (c. 350 BC-350 AD), and post-Meroitic sites (c. AD 350-500).

Many graves with differing substructures were registered, and stone and mud forts were observed in addition to the foundations of stone structures. One of the major archaeological features in the area is the concentration of rock drawings on wadi walls. Animal bones, potsherds, lithic tools, grinding stones and pipes were collected from the surface.

Paleolithic Sites

Across a broad area near the Saadinkorta mountains we identified six separate Paleolithic sites: SAK.18, measuring c. 200x120m; SAK.20, measuring 184x115m; SAK.22, measuring 257x126m; SAK.29, measuring 75x55m; SAK.32, measuring 320x230m; and SAK.42, a large site 550x340m in size. A number of stone tools (cores, hand axes, flakes and blades) dating to the Paleolithic period were spread over the surface of these sites (Figure 4). These finds further confirm Arkell's (1949, 43) discoveries in Wawa village, and Tahir and Said's (2014, 11) finds in Wadi Tagar.

Neolithic and Kerma Sites

Many Neolithic and Kerma sites were registered during the survey. Four of these (SAK.3; SAK.4; SAK.16; SAK.17) contained both Kerma and Neolithic material (Figures 5-7). SAK.1 contained a small number of graves, oval in shape with diameters c. 1-2m, (these could possibly be of A-Group/C-Group date). The SAK.3 group of graves numbered ten in total and were circular and oval in shape, with diameters c. 1-6m, and were covered by granite stones. Two sites, SAK.23 and SAK.24,



Figure 6. Kerma grave at SAK.16.



Figure 7. A Kerma grave at SAK.17.

contained Neolithic as well as later medieval artefacts. A large number of pottery sherds were spread over the surface of sites SAK.1, 2, 3 and 4, dating to the Neolithic, Pre-Kerma, C-Group(?) and Kerma periods. In addition, animal bones, an upper grinding stone, stone tools and fragments of ostrich eggshell were reported. At Site SAK.17, a Neolithic/Pre-Kerma (?) site situated on the top of a hill, was a small, oval grave built of stones, with a diameter of c. 1.5m.

Meroitic and post-Meroitic Sites

Generally, in the Third Cataract region, Meroitic sites are rare (Osman and Edwards 2011, 93-110; especially 110). In this area, only one possible Meroitic site was registered (SAK.11). It contains many graves, more than 120, and parts of the site had been heavily damaged by construction work (Figure 8). Several mud brick foundations of the grave superstructures survived. From the surface of the cemetery, sherds were recovered as well as a large fragment of a stone lintel. The cemetery area is directly threatened by newly planned cultivation, while other sections have already been covered by buildings, as yet unfinished. A post-Meroitic site was also located (SAK.27). It contained some circular and oval graves with stone substructures with diameters ranging from 1-5m (Figure 9). Spread over the site's surface were a few potsherds and stone tools.

Medieval and post-medieval Sites

As a result of previous archaeological studies, we know that the Third Cataract region is rich in medieval sites (Said 2005). In the study area, we found more than 15 Christian sites, including cemeteries, solitary graves, settlements and *diffi*.³ At all of these sites (SAK.1; SAK.7; SAK.8; SAK.14; SAK.16; SAK.19; SAK.21; SAK.23; SAK.28; SAK.30; SAK.31; SAK.34; SAK.35; SAK.37; SAK.40) Christian pottery sherds were collected.



Figure 8. Meroitic grave at SAK.11.



Figure 9. Post-Meroitic remains at SAK.27.

³ A fortified, defensive building enclosure, made of mud (*jalous*) and irregular stones, often containing a residential building.

Most of the sites appear to have been settlements and were registered as such. Within the cemeteries, different substructures could be distinguished. Circular and oval grave substructures, with superstructures comprised of rings of black stones of different sizes, with diameters ranging from 2-8m, were reported at sites SAK.3, SAK.15, SAK.30, SAK.31 and SAK.35. Some of the grave contents were scattered on the surface including human skeletal fragments and pottery sherds. There are two medieval *diffi* built of mud at SAK.7 and SAK.8. The first *diffi*, called 'Dokken Diffi', is square and large measuring 45x45m. The main entrance opens to the southeast and it has one tower and four rooms. The second *diffi*, called 'Nasserikken Diffi', appears to have two towers and several interior collapsed rooms.

Six sites had medieval and post-medieval occupation (SAK.3; SAK.5; SAK.9; SAK.10; SAK.15; SAK.22). There were two medieval and post-medieval *diffis* built of mud and mud bricks (SAK.5; SAK.10). The first *diffi* is called 'Hamadenikken Diffi' (Figure 10). It is square, and the main entrance is in the centre of the west wall. It has four towers and more than twelve interior rooms. There are also rooms outside the enclosure. Spread across the surface of the fort were medieval and post-medieval pot sherds. The second *diffi*, called 'Farah Kororen Diffi' (Figure 11), has four towers, one at each of the corners, and nine interior rooms. The main entrance opens to the south. The building's height is approximately 6m and the walls are c. 1m thick. There were also four Islamic settlement sites (SAK.3; SAK.13; SAK.15; SAK.22), with pot sherds, lithic tools, and grinding stones spread across their surfaces.

SAK.6, SAK.9, and SAK.18 were three post-medieval Islamic sites. The first was a rectangular mud building ('Bannya'), which served as a shrine and was called 'Dary-in-Tod'. It had three rooms and the main entrance opened to the south. SAK.9 was an early and modern Islamic cemetery. It has four rectangular structures in the centre built of mud and mud bricks. One of these was a 'Bannya' for 'Sheikh Nasr'. Another square building was also a 'Bannya', built of mud bricks, with its entrance opening to the southeast (Figure 12). Tombstones in the cemetery are of granite and sandstone (Figure 13). The third site, SAK.18, had a shrine built of mud, and spread over the surface of the site were Islamic pottery sherds, grinding stones and lithic tools.

Stone structures

On the hills near the Saadinkorta mountains, there are a number of stonewall structures of different shapes, both circular and oval, with diameters ranging between 1-8m (SAK.27; SAK.29) (Figure 14). A few lithic tools and a tethering stone were collected from the drystone structures (Figure 15), but their date and the exact function of most remains unclear.

Undated buildings

Oval, square, rectangular and circular buildings built of irregular granite stones, ranging in diameter



Figure 10. Medieval and post-medieval *diffi* at SAK.5.



Figure 11. Medieval and post-medieval *diffi* at SAK.10.



Figure 12. Islamic Bannya at SAK.9.



Figure 13. Islamic Tombstones at SAK.9.



Figure 14. Stone structures at SAK.27.



Figure 15. Tethering stone from SAK.29.



Figure 16. Undated buildings at SAK.35.



Figure 17. Drystone wall at SAK.26.

from 1-8m and with heights of approximately 1-1.5m were found at SAK.27, SAK.29, SAK.35 and SAK.37 (Figure 16). At SAK.32, there is a crescent-shaped building similarly constructed of stone. It opens to the south. Its function is unknown as is its date. A few pot sherds of uncertain date, and grinding stones were found on the surface of these sites.

Walls

A drystone wall 1m in height and c. 650m long and 0.65m wide, was reported in the Saadinkorta mountains on a small hill at site SAK.26 (Figure 17).

Rock drawings

One of the most abundant types of archaeological site found were rock drawings (SAK.4; SAK.15; SAK.40; SAK.42). Drawings found included a large number of animals identified as cattle, animal footprints, gazelle, and giraffe (Figures 18 and 19). There were also dots and outlines of human feet (*el-Nabiien-oye* – ‘Footprint of the Prophet Muhammad’) (Figure 20). Spread across the surface of these sites were a few pot sherds, animal bones and grinding stones. One of the most interesting discoveries were stone gaming boards, such as that found at SAK.41 (Figure 21).

Conclusions

Of the sites discovered during the current survey, prehistoric and Kerma period sites were abundant. The possible discovery of an A-Group grave north of Delgo town (study area – SAK.1) may extend the border of A-Group practices southwards. Like the discovery of TAG.23, a possible A-Group grave (Tahir and Said 2014, 12; 17; fig 10), SAK.1 might similarly ‘raise the question of a spatial and temporal relationship between the Pre-Kerma and A-Group. This area may have served as a buffer zone for Pre-Kerma and A-Group and later for Kerma and C-Group populations’ (Tahir and Said 2014, 23). The large number of

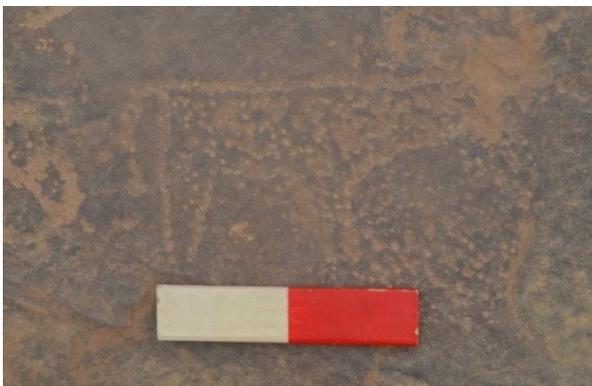


Figure 18. Rock drawing of a bull.



Figure 19. Rock drawings showing cattle.



Figure 20. Rock drawing with the outline of a human foot (*el-Nabiien-oye* – ‘Footprint of the Prophet Muhammad’).

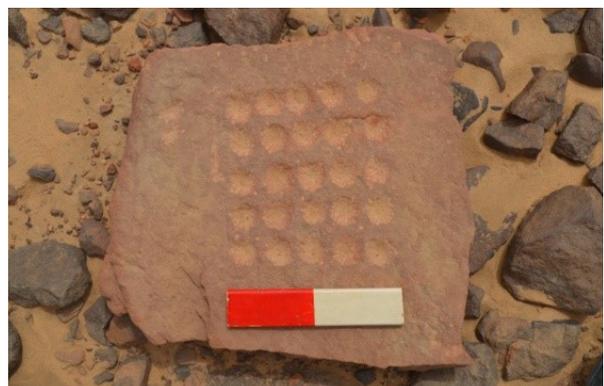


Figure 21. Stone gaming board found at SAK.41.

medieval and post-medieval sites, more numerous than the prehistoric and Kerma sites, are distributed throughout the area. Meroitic and post-Meroitic sites were rare in the study area, with only two located.

Stone walls are numerous in the Wadi Farja (Edwards *et al.* 2012; Tahir 2009b, 126) and Wadi Tagar (Tahir and Said 2014). Osman and Edwards (2000) suggest that they correlate with a water-harvesting system in Wadi Farja, and Edwards (2006) has also suggested that the walls were used for hunting. Research has revealed that the walls in the study area are of different types and functions. Other features in common between the Wadi Farja and Wadi Tagar are stone structures, stone-ringed graves, stone walls and rock drawings. Tahir (2012, 1) suggests that these features were adopted during pre-Kerma or Kerma times. Here in our study area, the similar features reported might suggest the prevalence of Wadi Farja and Wadi Tagar cultures in the study area.

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Site code	Position	Type	Date
SAK.1	N 20° 07.56/ E 30° 33.95	Graves	A-Group?; medieval
SAK.2	N 20° 07.54/ E 30° 33.91	Graves	C-Group?
SAK.3	N 20° 07.57/ E 30° 33.88	Graves; settlement	Neolithic; Kerma?; medieval; Islamic?
SAK.4	N 20° 07.61/ E 30° 33.89	Graves; rock drawing	Neolithic; Kerma
SAK.5	N 20° 07.57/ E 30° 33.60	<i>Diffi</i> (mud fort)	Medieval; post-medieval
SAK.6	N 20° 07.57/ E 30° 33.60	Shrine	Post-medieval
SAK.7	N 20° 08.17/ E 30° 33.60	<i>Diffi</i> (mud fort)	Medieval
SAK.8	N 20° 08.79/ E 30° 33.56	<i>Diffi</i> (mud fort)	Medieval
SAK.9	N 20° 07.86/ E 30° 33.74	Graves; shrine	Medieval; post-medieval
SAK.10	N 20° 07.53/ E 30° 33.52	<i>Diffi</i> (mud and mud brick fort)	Medieval; post-medieval
SAK.11	N 20° 07.79/ E 30° 33.88	Graves	Meroitic?
SAK.12	N 20° 07.97 / E 30° 33.02	Graves; settlement	Kerma?; medieval
SAK.13	N 20° 08.26 / E 30° 33.86	Settlement	post-medieval
SAK.14	N 20° 08.42/ E 30° 33.91	Graves; settlement	Kerma?; medieval
SAK.15	N 20° 08.47/ E 30° 33.92	Graves; rock drawing	Kerma?; medieval; post- medieval
SAK.16	N 20° 08.47/ E 30° 33.86	Settlement	Neolithic; Kerma; medieval
SAK.17	N 20° 08.71/ E 30° 33.97	Graves; settlement	Neolithic; Pre-Kerma?
SAK.18	N 20° 08.81/ E 30° 33.73	Graves; shrine; settlement	Prehistory; post-medieval
SAK.19	N 20° 08.94/ E 30° 33.62	Settlement	Medieval
SAK.20	N 20° 09.10/ E 30° 33.67	Workshop?; settlement	Prehistory; medieval
SAK.21	N 20° 09.18/ E 30° 33.61	Settlement	Medieval

Table 1. Sites in the study area.

Site code	Position	Type	Date
SAK.22	N 20° 09.22/ E 30° 33.66	Workshop; settlement	Prehistory; medieval; post-medieval
SAK.23	N 20° 09.39/ E 30° 33.66	Workshop; settlement	Neolithic; medieval
SAK.24	N 20° 09.61/ E 30° 33.60	Settlement	Neolithic-Medieval
SAK.25	N 20° 09.84/ E 30° 33.62	Unknown buildings	Prehistory?
SAK.26	N 20° 10.31/ E 30° 33.45	Wall; structures	Pre-Kerma; Kerma?
SAK.27	N 20° 07.77/ E 30° 34.12	Graves; unknown buildings	Post-Meroitic
SAK.28	N 20° 07.59/ E 30° 34.31	Settlement	Medieval
SAK.29	N 20° 07.81/ E 30° 34.31	Unknown buildings; graves?	Prehistory?
SAK.30	N 20° 07.57/ E 30° 34.39	Graves	Medieval
SAK.31	N 20° 07.95/ E 30° 34.09	Graves	Kerma?; medieval
SAK.32	N 20° 08.11/ E 30° 34.08	Graves; unknown building	Prehistory?
SAK.33	N 20° 08.05/ E 30° 34.28	Graves	A-Group
SAK.34	N 20° 08.29/ E 30° 34.09	Graves	Medieval
SAK.35	N 20° 08.15/ E 30° 34.03	Graves; unknown building	Medieval
SAK.36	N 20° 08.34/ E 30° 34.13	Graves	Kerma?
SAK.37	N 20° 08.54/ E 30° 34.10	Graves?; unknown buildings	Medieval
SAK.38	N 20° 08.72/ E 30° 34.10	Graves	Kerma?
SAK.39	N 20° 08.85/ E 30° 34.19	Graves	Kerma?
SAK.40	N 20° 08.70/ E 30° 34.60	Rock drawing; settlement	Medieval?
SAK.41	N 20° 08.79/ E 30° 33.56	Settlement; rock drawing	Medieval
SAK.42	N 20° 08.85/ E 30° 34.82	Graves; Rock Drawing	Prehistory

Table 1. Sites in the study area (continued).