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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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An inscribed basin of the 18th dynasty (reign of Amenhotep III) from the fortress of Shalfak in Lower Nubia

W. Vivian Davies



Figure 1. Inscribed basin from Shalfak (after Dunham 1967, pl. LX, A).

Introduction

The publication of the Harvard University-Boston Museum of Fine Arts excavation of the fortress of Shalfak in Nubia included, in its catalogue of finds, a description with photograph of ‘an inscribed circular sandstone basin with a dedicatory inscription round the rim’ (Dunham 1967, 116, 129 (31-2-357), pl. LX, A). Also included was a drawing of the inscription (with a number of gaps and uncertainties) but no translation or interpretation of the content (Dunham 1967, pl. LX, B). The basin (diameter 570mm; height 260mm), possibly intended to receive libations, is described as having been discovered in the northeast corner of Room 9 in Block I near the main (south) gate of the fortress. The location has been confirmed by the recent re-examination of the room by the new Shalfak Archaeological Mission, which found that the ‘mudbrick floor ... preserves the depression into which the sandstone basin mentioned by Dunham was set’ (Näser *et al.* 2017, 165). Room 9 appears to have been the entrance-room of a three-roomed structure (Rooms 7-9), its original function probably ‘in a domestic or workshop context’ (Näser *et al.* 2017, 165-167). Later, during the 18th dynasty, the structure might have been adapted to serve as the cult-place

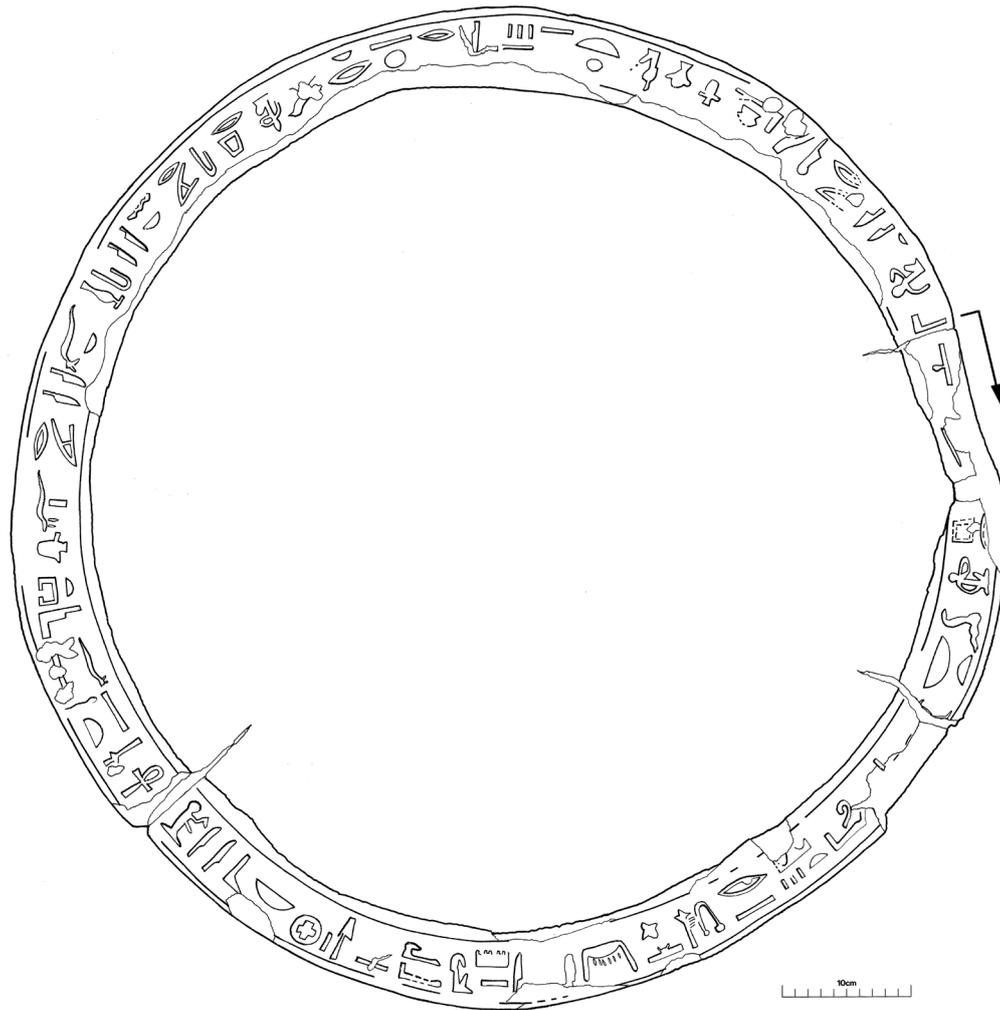


Figure 2. Inscribed basin from Shalfak, recent copy of inscription.

of the deity invoked on the basin. The present whereabouts of this basin is unknown, but I offer here a new, provisional, copy of the inscription, with translation, based on a scan of the original photograph (Figures 1-2).¹ As will be seen, the text consists of a dedication to the deified Meresger (wife of the deified Khakaure/Senwosret III), with further interesting content permitting the basin to be dated to the late 18th dynasty (reign of Amenhotep III).

The Inscription: Content and links

The inscription, a line of incised hieroglyphs, facing outwards, orientated right to left, runs, within a frame, around the entire rim of the basin. It begins at the point marked by the arrow on the copy (Figure 2). In reasonably good condition, though with areas of loss through damage and surface-erosion, it reads:

¹ I am grateful to Drs Rita Freed and Susan Allen of the MFA for their co-operation in providing a new scan of the photograph (Figure 1), Will Schenck for inking the copy (Figure 2), Dr Ikhlas Abdellatif for facilitating associated research in the Sudan National Museum, Dr Johannes Auenmüller for helpful comment on the interpretation of the inscription (in particular, regarding the principal dedicant's first title), Dr Hourig Sourouzian for advice on a matter of dating, Dr Ken Griffin and Elizabeth Fleming for bibliographic support, and Dr Renée Friedman for assistance in the preparation of the paper.

‘Divine offering² [for] Me[re]sger,³ mistress of Wa[f]khasut (Shalfak),⁴ made by Scribe, Reckoner of gold⁵ [of] Amun, Mayor of Sekhem,⁶ Neby, [repeating] life, (and) his sister (= wife),⁷ his favourite, his beloved, Songstress⁸ of Meresger, Great One of the musical troupe⁹ of Nebmaatre who dwells in Khaemmaat (Soleb),¹⁰ Meryt’.¹¹

This is a significant new attestation of the deified queen, Meresger, otherwise known from a small number of sources, most prominently the Year 2 inscription of Thutmose III at Semna, a text detailing festival-offerings to be provided for the cults of local deities, including Senwosret III and the ‘King’s great wife Meresger at Wafkhasut’ (see Caminos 1998, 43-44, 46-7, pls 23, 25, line 12).¹² The basin provides *in situ* evidence that the queen’s cult was indeed practised at Shalfak¹³ and was still operational in the later 18th dynasty (suggesting a longer occupation of the fortress than hitherto realised), as indicated by Meryt’s connection, as an officiant, not only to the Shalfak cult but also to that of the deified Nebmaatre in the temple of Soleb, constructed, of course, during the reign of Amenhotep III.¹⁴ Moreover, in view of the

² *hṯp-nṯr*, ‘Gottesopfer’, ‘Opfergabe für einen Gott’ (Wb. 3, 185; Hannig 2006, 610-611).

³ The initial signs of the name are here obscured by damage; cf. the intact version later in the inscription.

⁴ For *Wṣḫ-hꜣswt* as the name of the fortress of Shalfak, see Vogel 2004, 62, Table 2, no. 5, and 249; Obsomer 2007, 68; Somaglino 2017, 231. Of the name’s first element (*wṣḫ*), only remnants of the initial sign, G43, and of the following D36 survive here.

⁵ The sign following *nḃw* ‘gold’ (S12), its form obscured by erosion (read as *i* [M17] in Dunham 1967, pl. LX, B), might have been the determinative Z3 or possibly N33 (repeated and arranged vertically); the following genitival *n*, for which there is ample room, is lost in the damage. For the *ss ḥsb nḃw*, ‘Scribe, Reckoner of gold’, an important Treasury field-official, see Müller 2013, 55, 252-255; Klotz and Brown 2016, 283-284, C (j); Brown 2017, 184-187; Auenmüller 2020a, 373, Doc. 66, and 391; Davies 2020, 198-205, pl. 15.37, fig. 15.14, KRP18, no. 5, and pl. 15.41, fig. 15.19, KRP18, no. 13; for the Amun-affiliation, De Morgan 1894, 128, no. 9; Müller 2013, 55, 388, 15.1.26; Klotz and Brown 2016, 283-284, C (k).

⁶ *ḥꜣty-ꜣ n Ṣḫm* (see further below).

⁷ For this extended meaning of *snt*, firmly attested from the reign of Thutmose III onwards, see Wb. 4, 151, 9; Hannig 2006, 773, *snt* (2); Černý 1954, 24-25, 27-28; Robins 1979, 203-204; Whale 1989, 251-254; Toivari-Viitala 2001, 29-30; Bryan 2009, 23, 37, n. 22; Shirley 2010, 279-280; Davies 2014, 389; Jones 2018, 92; Skumsnes 2018, 117-123, 310-311.

⁸ Reading *ḥꜣty* as ‘songstress’ rather than ‘praised’ (see Onstine 2005, 6-7; cf. Stefanović 2009, 77-78) owing to its association here with the title following (see n. 9).

⁹ *wrt ḥnr* (the latter here written *ḥnrw*); the sign surmounting the plural strokes is possibly U31 (its right end eroded). On the title, that of a senior female temple-officiant, and the meaning of *ḥnr*, as ‘musical troupe’ or similar, see Nord 1981; Bryan 1982; Robins 1993, 148-149; Bryan 1996, 42-43; Onstine 2005, 7-8; Morris 2017, 310-312; for the various writings of *ḥnr*, see Wb. 3, 297-298; Hannig 2006, 650-651; Nord 1981, 137-139, with n. 2; Bryan 1982, 36-37; Al-Ayedi 2006, 251-255.

¹⁰ For the epithet and *Ḥꜣ-m-mꜣꜣt* as the (abbreviated) name of Soleb (full name *Nḃ-mꜣꜣt-rꜣ-ḥꜣ-m-mꜣꜣt*) see, recently, Beaux 2013, 16; Berman 2013, 40; Bickel 2013, 63; and Somaglino 2017, 235, commenting: ‘il s’agit du nom du menenou de Soleb. Il désigne le temple, mais sans doute aussi plus largement la ville, qui n’a cependant pu être fouillée jusqu’à présent’.

¹¹ For a parallel object, cf. the fragmentary sandstone basin (Khartoum, SNM 4449) from Faras, with a similar inscription mentioning Taemwadjsy, sister or wife of Huy, viceroy of Tutankhamun, as ‘Great One of the musical troupe of Nebkheprure who dwells in Sehetepnetjeru (Faras)’ (PM vii, 126; Karkowski 1981, 28, B, a, 69, 72, 85, n. 369, 89-90, no. 8, pl. v; Pinch 1993, 35, 38, 301, fig. 5, 9-10; Török, 2009, 173, no. 11; Gnirs 2013, 680, n. 170; Morkot 2013, 932-933, n. 74; Müller 2013, 232-233, 2.5.3 F6; 431, 34.11; Gabolde 2015, 263-264, fig. 116; Kendall *et al.* 2017, 175); on the name of Faras, Somaglino 2017, 236.

¹² Cf. Delia 1980, 12; Morris 2005, 98-100; Dorman 2006, 42; Müller 2013, 12, 60-61, 308, Anh. 2.6.2, no. 11; Laboury 2014, 56-57, fig. 5.7; Vogel 2017, 269-270; Näser 2018, 8, noting also the Shalfak rock-inscription of the viceroy Amenemkhu dated to Year 18 of Thutmose III, with dedication to the deified ‘King of Upper and Lower Egypt Khakaure’ (Hintze and Reineke 1989, 90, pl. 122, no. 365; El-Enany 2004, 210, no. 5; 2014, 231).

¹³ The other sources comprise: an offering-text on a Thutmoside stela from Kumma (Dunham and Janssen 1960, 124-125, 24-5-1 pl. 92, D [now SNM 2482]; Barns 1954, 24-25; Delia 1980, 13; El-Enany 2004, 208, n. 13), where ‘Meresger’ is invoked together with ‘Khnum’ and ‘Khakaure’ [I was able to verify the reading of her name during a recent visit to the SNM]; a possible representation of her, with inscription, on a fragmentary stela, probably Thutmoside, from Semna (Dunham and Janssen 1960, 43, 24-2-318, pl. 39, B); a fragmentary stela, of uncertain provenance, showing the king [‘Kha]kau[re]’ and ‘King’s wife Meresger’ (Hall 1913, 8, pl. xxiii, BM EA 846; Bruyère 1930, 213-215, fig. 110; PM i/2, 807; Delia 1980, 12-13; Troy 1986, 159, 12.27; Quirke 1990, 53; El-Enany 2004, 212; Grajetzki 2014, 53, fig. 5, and 55; tentatively dated, on grounds of style and iconography, to the reign of Ramesses II by Dr Hourig Sourouzian [pers.comm.]); and a kohl-pot, of unknown provenance, bearing the inscription ‘Great king’s wife Meresger’ (Christie Sale-Catalogue, March 10, 1970, 47; Delia 1980, 13). Meresger is hitherto unattested in Middle Kingdom sources but the proposal of Bruyère 1930, 211-215, 217 (cf. Delia 1980, 14; Grajetzki 2014, 55; Vogel 2017, 270, n. 17) that she be regarded as fictive, an invention of the 18th dynasty to provide a wife for the deified Senwosret III, remains open to question.

¹⁴ The process of deification of the living king as the god ‘Nebmaatre who dwells in Soleb’ (and ‘Lord of Nubia’) was arguably completed with the celebration of his first jubilee in Year 30 (Bryan 1992, 106-111; Johnson 1998, 89-90; Kozloff 2012, 191-192; Beaux 2013, 35-36; Berman 2013, 45; Bickel 2013, 71-73; Hornung 2013, 94), the event presumably marking also the inception of the Soleb cult of the divine Nebmaatre, of which Meryt was a functionary (and in turn, if such is the case, probably dating

latter connection, it seems almost certain (and is cautiously assumed in the following discussion) that Mayor of Sekhem Neby and wife Meryt, the dedicants of the Shalfak basin, are the same people as the contemporary pair, Mayor Neby and Meryt/Meryt-sherit, the owners of Soleb Tomb no. 15, the latter known from two fragmentary shabti-figures (Schiff Giorgini 1971, 99, 186, 193-194, figs 341-342, T 15 p1 [SNM 11845]; 248-249, figs 481-482, T 24 p1 [SNM 60/4/21]),¹⁵ the former from an inscribed door jamb (Schiff Giorgini 1971, 98, 186, 187, 192, 248-249, figs 483-484, T 24 p2).¹⁶

Founded, as already noted, under Amenhotep III, Soleb (Khaemmaat), the administrative capital of Upper Nubia,¹⁷ no doubt in succession to Sai,¹⁸ was situated in the vicinity of an area rich in gold-production sites.¹⁹ It is well known that an intensification of the gold-industry as a whole occurred during the latter's reign, directed by Viceroy of Kush Merymose, the first viceroy to hold the title 'Overseer of the gold-lands of Amun.'²⁰ Neby's role as 'Scribe, Reckoner of gold of Amun', reflects the priorities of the administration,²¹ while his title, 'Mayor of Sekhem', the toponym surely referring to Semna,²² and his interest in Shalfak, not far from Semna, suggest that his official remit, extending well beyond Soleb (the latter presumably his home-base), covered the old strategic border region (once separating Egypt from Kush) to the south of the Second Cataract in the Batn el-Hajar,²³ with the regional base located at Semna. The border fortresses, established by the legendary Khakaure (Senwosret III),²⁴ now the principal cult-places of the deified king (and wife),²⁵ probably functioned, to varying degrees, as nodes of local administration and as venues 'for at least a limited range of activities.'²⁶ However, the business of regional resource extraction and its control would surely have remained central concerns, not least in relation to the gold-working sites along the Batn el-Hajar, from Saras southwards and notably at Duweishat, a short

the Shalfak basin to the King's Year 30 or later). Note that Meryt, as the sole known female officiant (and in a senior role), is a significant addition to Soleb temple's slim prosopographical database (for the latter, Auenmüller 2018, 247-249).

¹⁵ Cf. Auenmüller 2018, 247-248, Table 3, T 15. Meryt's damaged title, in the case of T24 p1 (fig. 482), is quite possibly to be understood as *wr[t] hm(r)w*.

¹⁶ Cf. Minault Gout and Thill 2012, 182, b; Auenmüller 2013, 698, 931, BMSoleb-01; Müller 2013, 209, 2.5.2, no. 18; 459, 47.9; Auenmüller 2018, 247-248, Table 3, T 15, and 255. The inscription, now incomplete and eroded, appears originally to have contained two or three titles (probably those held towards the end of his career) but, on the basis of the published photograph, only the last, *hꜣty-ꜣ Nby*, 'Mayor Neby', without toponym, can be read with confidence. Previous commentators (unaware of the Shalfak inscription) have understandably assumed that Neby's mayoralty was of Soleb itself.

¹⁷ See Auenmüller 2013, 698, 931; Morkot 2013, 915, 936-937; Müller 2013, 12; Brown 2017, 193-194; Auenmüller 2018, 247-249.

¹⁸ See Minault-Gout and Thill 2012, 415, with n. 27, and 418; Auenmüller 2013, 698; Thill 2016, 263-265, 297- 299; Bonnet and Valbelle 2018, 181; Budka 2018a, 123-124; Auenmüller 2018, 246, 254; Budka 2020b, 154, 397, 401-402, 407, 425; for parallels between Tomb 15 at Soleb, dated by its excavator to the reign of Amenhotep III, and Tomb 26 at Sai and the 'close connection between the two sites during the second half of the 18th dynasty', Budka 2018b, 191, 194; 2020b, 402.

¹⁹ See McLean 2017, 90, 93, 94, and 96: 'The region of the Gorgod Hills ... between the settlements of Soleb and Sesebi was a significant source of gold production in the 18th dynasty'; cf. Vieth 2018, 233; Davies 2020, 213, with n. 139.

²⁰ See Murnane 1998, 178; Eichler 2000, 188-190; Mahfouz 2005, 58-59, 75-77; Török 2009, 173, no. 9; Müller 2013, 8, 230, 2.5.3 E38; Brown 2017, 178.

²¹ Note also the presence at Soleb of a contemporary 'goldsmith' (*nby*), named Bak, depicted on an architrave from Tomb 38 (Schiff Giorgini 1971, 98, T 38, p1, and 319-320, fig. 629; Müller 2013, 186, 2.3.2, no. 39, and 458, 47.4; Auenmüller 2018, 247-248, Table 3, T 38; 2020a, 386-387, Tab. 39, Doc. 76, and 389; 2020b, 60); on the prosopographic record for 'goldworkers' in New Kingdom Nubia, see now Auenmüller 2020a, 386-390.

²² With 'Sekhem' understood as an abbreviated form of the original name of Semna fortress, 'Sekhem-Khakaure', *Shm-Ḥꜣ-kꜣw-rꜣ* (as suggested in Dunham and Janssen 1960, 47, 28-1-69, n. 1; Bryan 1991, 201; cf. Davies 2018, 350, n. 12; for the full name, Vogel 2004, 62, Table 2, no. 2, and 259-261; Hannig 2006, 1185-1186; Obsomer 2007, 66, 68; El-Enany 2014, 230; Tallet 2014, 146; Davies 2017, 77-78, fig. 12, with n. 9; Somaglino 2017, 231, 233). Note the epithet 'Lord of Sekhem' (*nb Shm*) of the deified Khakaure attested at Dakke (*temp.* Thutmose III; Dewachter 1971, 90, n. 2; El-Enany 2004, 212, n. 46; at Uronarti (*temp.* Amenhotep II; Davies 2018, 350, 353, fig. 6, left, line 1); and at Amada (*temp.* Thutmose IV; Barguet and Dewachter 1967, IV, C9; Bryan 1991, 201, 237, n. 327; El-Enany 2004, 212, no. 13).

²³ On the region's historic and ideological significance during the 18th dynasty and the importance of Semna, see Klotz and Brown 2016, 278, 291, 298-299; Brown 2017, 194.

²⁴ Vogel 2004, 71-72, abb. 10, and 77 (5.2.3.2); Obsomer 2007, 66-68; Vogel 2013, 79-80; Tallet 2014, 146, fig. 2; Somaglino 2017, 233-234; Vogel 2017, 268-269; Knoblauch 2019, 370-372.

²⁵ El-Enany 2004, 213; 2014; Somaglino 2017, 236; Vogel 2017, 268-274, 277-278; Ullmann 2019, 512, 521, 532-533.

²⁶ Näser 2018, 8-9 (with regard to Shalfak); cf. S. T. Smith 2003, 97-99 (Askut); more generally, Morris 2005, 78-81; Müller 2013, 111-112; Vogel 2013, 80-81; Spencer 2019, 436-440.

information, bearing on the deified Meresger, her cult, its duration and, by extension, the official use-life of the fortress, as well as including prosopographical data with significant local and wider implications, offering scope for further productive research. Long neglected (and still lost), the basin may now play a fuller part in the welcome new investigation of this notably important site,³³ one of only two such fortresses (the other, Uronarti) that still survive.³⁴

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³³ Näser *et al.* 2017; Näser 2018; cf. Edwards and Mills 2020, 163-165.

³⁴ Welsby 2004; on the programme of renewed work at Uronarti, see, most recently, Knoblauch and Bestock 2017; Bestock and Knoblauch 2020; cf. Edwards and Mills 2020, 166-171.

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