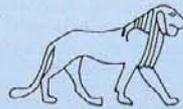


SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Bulletin No. 11

2007





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Front cover: Village on the Island of Dirbi in the SARS concession above the Fourth Nile Cataract (photo: D. A. Welsby).



Preliminary Report on the Second Season of Excavations conducted on Mis Island (AKSC)

Andrew Ginns

During the 2005-06 season of fieldwork carried out on Mis Island,¹ exhumations from three separate medieval cemeteries were conducted, in order to obtain a large population sample for future osteological study. Limited excavation of a medieval settlement site was also carried out during that season. The second season of fieldwork conducted on Mis Island took place in early 2007 and saw a continuation of the excavations within the three cemeteries and in the adjacent settlement.²

Cemetery 3-J-10

During the 2005-06 season, a total of 44 individuals were exhumed from the medieval cemetery site 3-J-10. A further 81 individuals were exhumed in the 2007 season, bringing the total number of exhumed individuals across both seasons to 125.

The preliminary 'in field' break-down of the ages of the exhumed individuals followed the same pattern as that noted in the previous season, with a very high infant and child mortality rate tailing off during adolescence (Figure 1).

Individuals were exhumed from across the extent of the site, in order to leave no large area of the cemetery unsampled.

There were two main burial styles practiced within this cemetery:

1. The deceased were placed on either side, or on their backs in a grave cut with no structural elaboration.
2. The deceased were placed on their backs and sub-square rocks were placed either side of the head, with a flat rock then placed on them over the face.

The first burial style was used in a little over half of the inhumations excavated, the rest were of the second variety. Within this latter category were two burials utilising mud bricks, in place of rocks, to protect the head (Plate 1).

Within this overall burial trend were a handful of un-

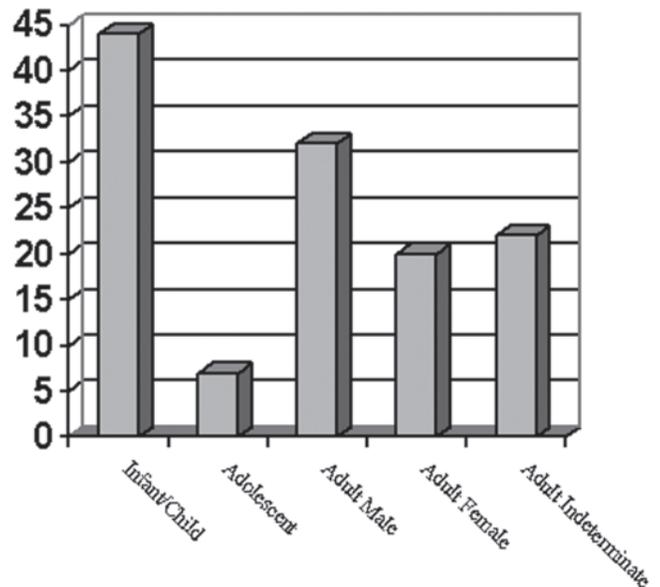


Figure 1. Preliminary identifications of inhumations excavated from 3-J-10 across both seasons.

sual burials. There were two instances of burials where the deceased was aligned in the opposing direction to the norm, with the head at the eastern end of the grave cut. Two burials, with the deceased laid in a prone position, were also present.

The monuments associated with adult burials were of the standard box-grave type. They were constructed of sub-angular rocks set in a rectangle and with the rocks arranged to form flat external faces, often still surviving to four courses in height. The interior of the monuments was of smaller rocks and gravel. Only monuments associated with infants and young child burials differed in form. Some were constructed of rocks forming an irregular pavement, others were of small rocks formed into an oval or sub-rectangular outline with gravel inside this rock perimeter. A number of child burials were unmarked, possibly because the associated monuments were eroded over time.

Cemetery 3-J-11

A total of 163 exhumations from the medieval cemetery site 3-J-11 were conducted during the 2005-06 season. Within the 2007 field season a further 120 exhumations



Plate 1. Inhumation of burial type 2 with three mud bricks placed around the head.

¹ See Ginns 2006 for a summary of the 2005-06 season. See Welsby 2003 for descriptions of the sites prior to excavation.

² Team members:- Catherine Bird (osteologist), Andrea Clowes (osteologist), Showgi Dow Elbied (NCAM inspector first half of season), Saami Elamin (NCAM inspector second half of season), Andrew Ginns (director), Lindsey Jenny (osteologist), Anna Mabrey (ceramicist, illustrator), Hussein Mosa (cook), Tracy Titchnell (osteologist), Stefanie Vincent (osteologist), Richard Watt (archaeologist).

were conducted giving a combined total of 283. The same age pattern of deceased individuals as noted in the 3-J-10 cemetery was also found in this cemetery, a very high infant and child mortality rate tailing off during adolescence (Figure 2).

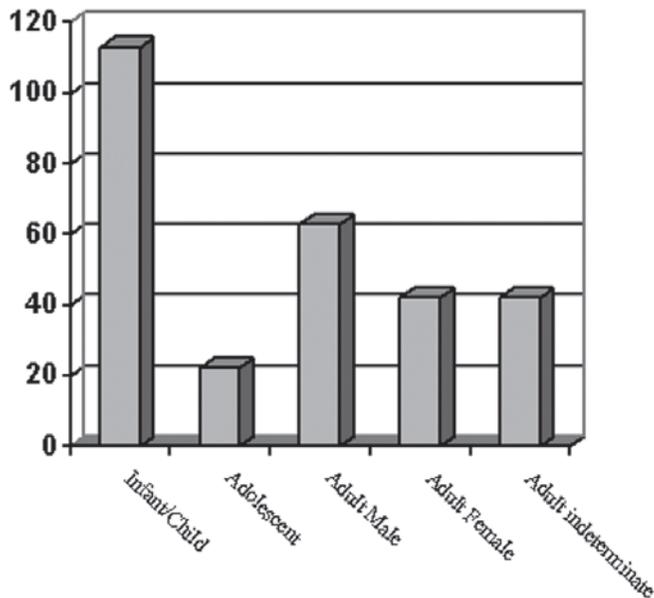


Figure 2. Preliminary identifications of inhumations excavated from 3-J-11 across both seasons.

As noted in the report on the 2005-06 season, there were three main burial styles practiced within the 3-J-11 medieval cemetery. A single example of a fourth type was noted this season:

1. The deceased were placed on either side or on their backs in a grave cut with no structural elaboration.
2. The deceased were placed on their backs, with either rocks, or mud bricks placed either side of and over the head.
3. The deceased were placed on their backs and then large flat blocking stones were placed on ledges in the grave cut above the body, thus creating a chamber in which earth was kept away from the body (Figure 3).
4. The upper part of the grave cut is rectangular, measuring 2.5m in length and 1m in width. The lower part of the grave cut is central to the upper portion and is of the same dimensions as more standard grave cuts. The deceased was placed within the lower part of the grave cut and flat blocking stones were then placed across the top of the lower part of the cut again creating a chamber where earth was kept away from the body (Figure 4).

Similar to the inhumations within 3-J-10, a little under half of the inhumations within 3-J-11 were of the second type, with rocks placed around the heads. The use of mud bricks, instead of stones, was much more common in this cemetery, with 10% of the inhumations having mud bricks

placed around the head. Four burials had combinations of stone and mud brick around the head.

Of the inhumations excavated, 40% were seen to be of the first type of burial practice, with no structural elaboration to the grave cut. Much less common were examples of the third type, with blocking stones. These accounted for only 7% of the excavated graves within 3-J-11. It is suggested that this type and the fourth type are earlier than types 1 and 2. Several examples of graves with blocking-stones having been disturbed, or truncated by later graves, with no structural elaboration were present. No examples of graves with blocking-stones, having truncated burials of types 1 or 2, were present.

The fact that certain graves were truncated by later ones meant that their associated monuments were either removed during the digging of the later graves, or were sufficiently denuded to be unrecognisable to the individuals digging the later graves. Graves with no monument were not uncommon. The majority of burials excavated, however, did have associated monuments, mainly of the standard type of stone box-grave construction, as seen in the 3-J-10 cemetery.

Two different types of monument were also represented. There was a single example of a monument constructed of four large mud bricks placed flat in a single line (Plate 2)

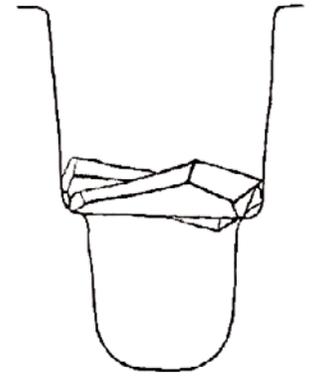


Figure 3. Burial type 3.



Plate 2. Mud brick grave monument in the cemetery at site 3-J-11.



and several examples of monuments, constructed of large, long, stone slabs, laid widthways, forming a pavement over the top of the grave (Plate 3) (MDASP Type FF02f).

A feature differentiating 3-J-11 from the other medieval cemeteries on the island was the inclusion of ceramic vessels within the graves of a number of individuals. The more



Plate 3. Stone-pavement grave monument in 3-J-11.

common location of these vessels was at the feet of the deceased, with the grave cuts lengthened to accommodate them. Vessel types were commonly cups, or large spherical vessels, with grave cuts being widened at the eastern end to accommodate the latter. Several graves contained one of both types. In many instances where ceramic vessels were found, the associated skeletons were disturbed by later grave digging activity. The fact that disturbed graves are relatively early in date and contain a high ratio of ceramic vessels indicates that the depositing of these as grave goods was practiced in the earlier periods of use of the cemetery.

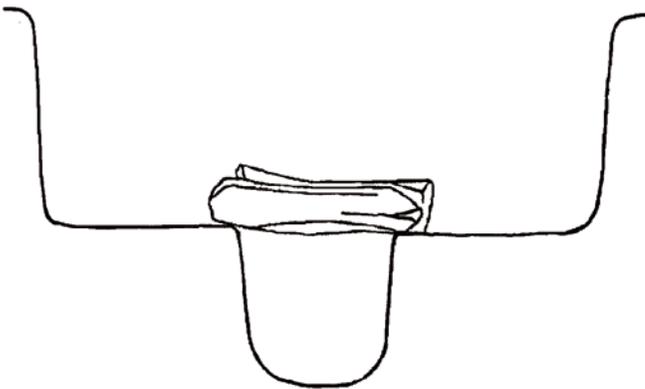


Figure 4. Burial type 4.

Predating the medieval burials in the 3-J-11 cemetery was a phase of Meroitic activity. Unearthed in the previous season was a robbed burial from that period. The burial was in a subterranean chamber, still containing many of the grave goods (Colour plate XVI). No further burials of this sort were encountered in this season's work. However, evidence that at least one more did exist was found. This was an assemblage containing a large spherical painted ceramic vessel, a ceramic cup and a copper-alloy beaker (Colour

plate XVII). The disturbed nature of the assemblage was evidenced by the cup being found upside down and the beaker 'floating' above the spherical vessel. It would be expected that such an assemblage should be associated with an inhumation, but in this instance there was none. Any such remains had been removed by later, medieval grave digging activity.

Church Cemetery 3-J-18

A total of 96 exhumations from the medieval cemetery site 3-J-18 were conducted during the 2005-06 season. Within the 2007 field season a further 123 exhumations were conducted giving a combined total of 219.

The preliminary 'in field' break down of the ages of the exhumed individuals followed a pattern differing from that noted in the 3-J-10 and 3-J-11 cemeteries. The very high infant and child mortality rate of those cemeteries is not in evidence in this cemetery, with a much higher ratio of inhumations being those of adults (Figure 5). The reason for this is unlikely to be due to a drop in infant and child mortality rates. A more logical scenario is that there was a preference for burying deceased children in either the 3-J-10 or 3-J-11 cemeteries. This, therefore, implies that the 3-J-18 cemetery was in use contemporaneously with either/both 3-J-10 and 3-J-11.

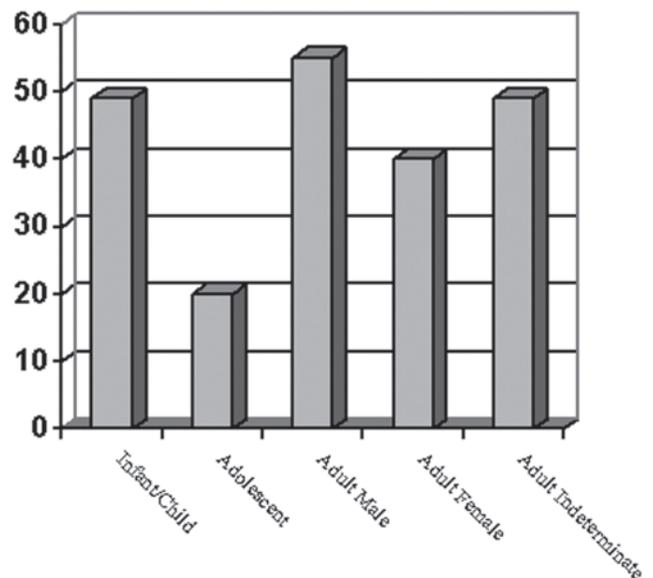


Figure 5. Preliminary identifications of inhumations excavated from 3-J-18 across both seasons.

The association of this cemetery to the church (excavated in 2005-06) which it surrounds, differentiates it from the two cemeteries previously discussed. The use of this cemetery, contemporaneously with other cemeteries on Mis and also of those in the wider local area, allowed choice as to where deceased individuals could be buried. Burials within



Plate 4. Fired brick and mud brick grave monuments in the 3-J-18 cemetery.

the church cemetery could well have been reserved for more ‘prestigious’ individuals from the local area. The lower ratio of child burials goes some way to reinforcing this claim, as does the use of different monument types used to mark the graves within the 3-J-18 cemetery.

As noted in the previous year’s report, monuments were constructed of either stone, fired brick, mud brick or, in a few cases, combinations of these materials (Plate 4). Almost all the brick monuments only survived to a height of a single course, the complete form of the monuments being lost. However, interesting variations in construction technique were evident.

Fired brick monuments were formed of a rectangle of bricks forming the outer faces (MDASP type FF01b) (Plate 5). These were commonly laid flat and end to end, but sometimes the bricks were placed on their edges. The natural sand/silt was the most common material used within the interior of the fired brick monuments. Some monuments had the inner portions also of fired brick, others were seen to have mud brick used within them (MDASP type FF02c). Rubble (or a combination of materials) was not used to form the core of these types of fired-brick monument. A number of the fired-brick monuments still had lime rendering attached to them in places.



Plate 5. Remains of a typical fired brick grave monument from the cemetery at site 3-J-18.

Mud-brick monuments generally followed a common pattern. Surviving only as a single course of bricks, these bricks were all placed on end. The bricks were arranged so that there was a line of bricks running centrally along the length of the monument, with bricks running off at right angles from this on either side (MDASP type FF02a). The central line of bricks was of either one, two, or three brick thicknesses (Plate 6). No lime rendering was present upon any of the mud-brick monuments. The positioning of mud-brick monuments amongst contemporary fired-brick ones (Plate 4) suggests the possibility that these, like the fired-brick examples, were also lime rendered.

The majority of inhumations within the 3-J-18 cemetery were placed within grave cuts with no structural adornments. Examples of inhu-

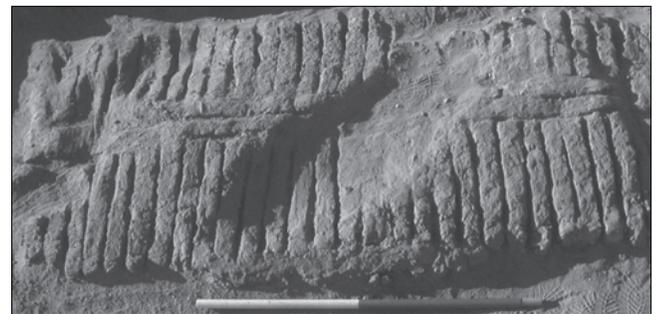


Plate 6. Remains of a typical mud-brick grave monument from 3-J-18.

mations with the three stones protecting the head were present, but in greatly reduced proportion within the overall number of burials excavated. No examples of burials that had large blocking stones forming chambers were present, excepting one that was located within (and predating) the church, excavated in the previous season.

A fifth type of burial type was encountered within 3-J-18 (Figure 6). This was represented by a single example. The deceased was placed within the grave cut and then half way up the cut a capping was formed of fired bricks and mud mortar.

Overall preservation of remains within the 3-J-18 cemetery was markedly better than at 3-J-10 and 3-J-11. Bodies with soft tissue and preserved textiles were not uncommon. The quality of preservation elucidated burial practices to a degree. Deceased individuals were often completely wrapped in a woven shroud, bound with lengths of string (Plate 7). Of note were two examples of deceased individuals with the

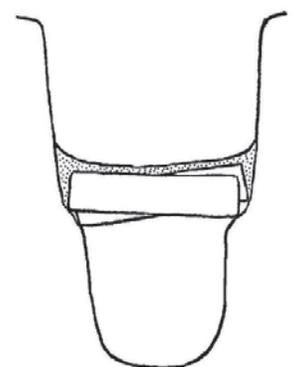


Figure 6. Burial type 5.



Plate 7. Child burial from 3-J-18. The body is wrapped in cloth and then bound with lengths of string.

structure (Plate 8). Work on this site was conducted in order to better understand the stone-built structure. This was aligned NNE – SSW and it was built of carefully placed stones 200-600mm in size, forming walls averaging 500mm thick. The walls were built directly onto the bedrock and prominent outcrops of bedrock were utilised as components of the walls.

Within the SSW side of the structure there was a grave cut running ESE – WNW cut into the bedrock. The grave



Plate 8. The 'mausoleum' at site 3-J-20.

cut was flanked on its NNE side by a single line of fired bricks surviving to two courses in height. These were the remains of the monument associated with the grave cut. The respective alignments of the rectangular stone structure and of the grave cut within is indicative of them being contemporary. The direct association is suggestive of the structure being a mausoleum.

big toes tied together thereby keeping the feet side by side.

No burials within 3-J-18 contained ceramic vessels. However, jewellery was present in a number of cases. This included beads from necklaces and metal rings, earrings and bracelets. Two inhumations had metal cross pendants, one of these (Colour plate XVIII) also with beads and organic remains from the associated necklace.

Cemetery 3-J-20

This cemetery was situated at the top of a hill limiting the southern edge of settlement 3-J-19. The site contained only five inhumations, all of which had clearly been robbed. Four of these burials were once below fired-brick monuments, one was within a rectangular, stone-built structure

cut was flanked on its NNE side by a single line of fired bricks surviving to two courses in height. These were the remains of the monument associated with the grave cut. The respective alignments of the rectangular stone structure and of the grave cut within is indicative of them being contemporary. The direct association is suggestive of the structure being a mausoleum.

The position of this site on the high point of Mis Island is not an obvious location for burials, bearing in mind that graves would need to be cut into the bedrock. The chosen location, presumably, is due to a desire to give prominence to the graves by occupying this commanding position. This, allied with the fact that space for inhumations upon the hill top was limited, quite possibly made this site an exclusive place for the dead to be buried. The use of fired brick in the construction of the monuments attests to this as does the 'mausoleum'.

Pathology

In-depth study of the recovered skeletal material was not carried out in the field. This will be carried out at a future point. However, several instances of violence and possible violent damage to individuals were noted in the preliminary 'in field' study. From the 3-J-11 cemetery was an unhealed trauma running across two of the lumbar vertebrae. This was caused by a sharp object used in a stabbing motion. Another individual had a skull with a large depression fracture that had healed. A third had a sharp force trauma to the skull that had not healed. From the 3-J-18 cemetery, an individual exhibited a healed depression fracture as well as a fatal sharp-force trauma on the skull (Plate 9).

3-J-19 Settlement

Small scale excavations of the medieval settlement 3-J-19 were conducted in the previous season's work. The character of the site, prior to excavation, was of irregular stones



Plate 9. Skull from cemetery 3-J-18 with healed depression fracture towards the rear and sharp-force trauma on the side.

strewn over a large area with occasional depressions with fewer stones. These depressions were signifiers to the internal spaces of buildings that once stood on the site. The site also displayed a few structural features surviving a little above the overburden. The previous season's work concentrated on the excavation of two of the more visible structures and of their immediate surroundings.

The continuation of excavation within 3-J-19 this season was carried out with a different strategy. Three 10 × 10m squares arranged in an L-shape were examined. This excavation area lay between the two areas studied in the previous season and was conterminous with these, thereby creating a single large area of excavation. Clearance of wind-blown silts and sand exposed varying densities of unworked stones. Removal of stones 'floating' in the overburden allowed the identification of foundations of buildings to be seen with more clarity (Plate 10).

After removal of the overburden, two of the 10 × 10m squares were seen to contain a collection of sub-circular and sub-square remains of building foundations constructed of stone. The low height and poor quality of the stone remains encountered proved problematic in interpreting the functions of any particular feature. Also, the density of sections of stone foundation indicated several phases of building. Instances of foundations surviving to a single course and running under later foundations were recorded. The low height of surviving foundations/walls is a probable indicator of robbing and reuse of building materials in new structures. The degree of robbing of building materials and the associated low heights of surviving walls also had the result of limiting the thickness of layers within a stratigraphy. The average thickness of the silt-sand build up above the natural horizon was only 300mm with no identifiable stratigraphic layering visible.

The third 10 × 10m square when cleared of its overburden of wind-blown silts, sand and 'floating' stones revealed



Plate 10. Stone foundations of two round houses at site 3-J-19.

the natural surface of hard silt. Within this was cut a series of channels, orientated in parallel lines north to south and east to west. These channels were presumably the result of small stakes being spaced very closely together and being driven into the surface, thereby creating fences or semi-permanent walls. The walls may have been associated with animal husbandry. The closely spaced parallel nature of the channels implies movement of these semi-permanent walls, with the area itself retaining the same function (Plate 11).

Also cut into this surface were 14 post-holes. Most of the post-holes were isolated from others, possibly belonging



Plate 11. Hard silt natural surface with the closely spaced parallel channels.

to posts which supported ramshackle roofs over the semi-permanent animal pens. Four post-holes showed a clear association to each other. They formed an arc, perhaps part of a circular structure.

This surface also exhibited evidence of having been baked by fire in places. The baked areas were small and may have been single fire events rather than areas in which cooking, or other practices involving fire were commonly practiced. No structural remains, exhibiting a clear association with the baked areas, were present.

Acknowledgements

This project was only made possible through the generous support of the Packard Humanities Institute to whom we are most grateful. We would also like to thank the staff of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums for all their help and support. The friendship, help and hard work of the Shaigiya people of Mis Island are also gratefully acknowledged.

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Colour plate XVI. Mis Island. Meroitic painted vessel.



Colour plate XVII. Mis Island. Meroitic vessels assemblage.



Colour plate XVIII. Mis Island. Remains of necklace and cross pendant from 3-J-18.