

SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



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Egypt

RED SEA

KOM OMBO
ASWAN
1st cataract

Karanog
Qasr Ibrim
Ballana
Faras
Adindan

2nd cataract
WADI HALFA
Amka
Saras
Difflinog

Semna
Attiri
Kidinkoñ
Kulubnarti

Jebel Kajbar
Jebel Wahaba
Sabu
Hannek
Kerma
Tabo
Kawa

Jebel Barkal
4th cataract
Sanam
Abu Dom

Gala Abu Ahmed

ABU HAMED

5th cataract
Jebel Nakharu
Dangeil
ATBARA
el-Frai
ED-DAMER

Meroe


el-Hobagi
6th cataract
Sabaloka
Musawwarat es-Sufra
Naqa


OMDURMAN
KHARTOUM


NEW HALFA
KHASHM
EL-GIRBA


Eritrea

Ethiopia

 The Sudan Archaeological Research Society Concession

 Ancient sites

 MODERN TOWNS

 Evacuated sites



0 250 km

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Front cover: Beja man by the well at Bir Vario, Eastern Desert (photo K. Pluskota).



Kirwan Memorial Lecture

Bir Nurayet – the Rock Art Gallery of the Red Sea Hills

Krzysztof Pluskota

On the eve of the New Year 1999 the discovery of an interesting archaeological site took place in North-Eastern Sudan. Two solitary travellers found a huge gallery of ancient rock art hidden in a remote valley of the Red Sea Hills. Thousands of rock drawings concentrated in an enclosed area create a gallery which seems to have almost no analogy in this part of Africa. On the other hand, the way in which it came to be discovered does not belong to conventional practice in the 20th century.

In December 1997 in the town of ed-Damer on the Nile, c. 220km to the north of Khartoum, Krzysztof Pluskota, Polish archaeologist (Plate 1), and Arita Baaijens, Dutch writer and desert explorer¹ (Plate 2), bought three dromedaries in the local market. The aim was to enter the Nubian Desert with a small caravan, passing through extensive tracts of North-Eastern Sudan and reaching the shore of the Red Sea at the small town of Mohammad Qol (Figure 1).² The whole area is populated almost exclusively by people of the Beja, descendants of the ancient Medjay and medieval Blemmyes, and is still much less known than regions of the Nile Valley. Only a handful of travellers had visited these lands and left any record in modern times. Archaeological work was conducted there very occasionally up to the end of the 1980s when an Italian expedition led by Angelo and Alfredo Castiglioni started their project (Castiglioni *et al.* 1998). Ancient Egyptian and medieval sources often mention this land and its people, since they were known to be rich sources of gold.

The choice of travelling by camel, or more precisely walking with these animals, which carried our water, food and equipment, was not accidental or based on the desire for a more adventurous experience. Most important was to be able to get to desert and mountainous locations that are

inaccessible in some cases even for all-terrain vehicles and approach nomads who are usually aloof to intruders coming in vehicles. Arita's experience in handling camels and classic navigation with compass and maps was in this case crucial and without her know-how the whole trek without help from local guides could have ended in disaster.



Plate 1. The author with *Atbara* (photo A. Baaijens).

Equipped with appropriate permits from the Ministry of Tourism of the Sudan and maps and politely refusing offers to act as guides from some camel drivers in ed-Damer, our small caravan set off towards the north-east. The route led through Wadi Obak, Wadi Okliss, Wadi Ariab, Wadi Amur, Wadi Dayyat, Khor Sasa and Wadi Aquampt to the slopes of the monumental Jebel Erba³ (2213m). Then after passage along Wadi Tomala and Wadi Hokeib the small, picturesque town of Mohammad Qol, located close to



Plate 2. Arita with a daughter of *Mabruka*.

¹ Arita Baaijens had before these treks travelled for many years through the Western Desert in Egypt and subsequently through Kordofan and Darfur in the Sudan. She has published many articles as well as several books, among them *Een regen van eeuwig vuur*, Pandora Pockets, 1993, *Oase Farafra*, Amsterdam 1998 and *Woestijnnomaden, Trektocht door Sudan*, Amsterdam 2003.

² We owe thanks to Dr Mahmoud el-Tayeb Mahmoud, lecturer in archaeology at Warsaw University, for valuable suggestions which helped us to plan the general route of the journey.

³ The name of the peak both in Arabic *jebel* as well as *erba* of Bedawiye means 'a mountain'.

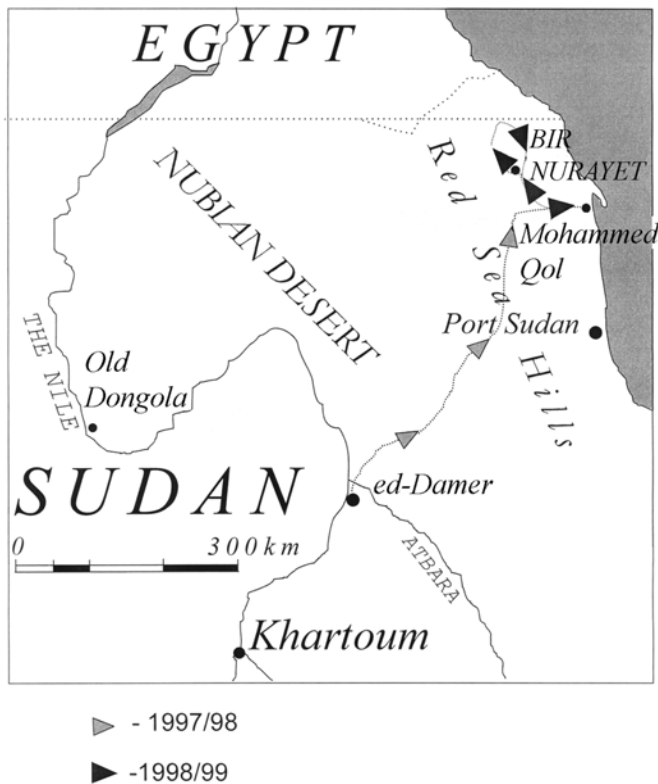


Figure 1. Routes of the treks.

Dungunab Bay on the Red Sea, was reached. Although the distance from ed-Damer to Mohammad Qol as the crow flies is ≈ 530 km, the caravan walked more than 900km being dependent on the topography of wadies (valleys) as well as the location of water wells. These wells were situated at distances of several walking days from each other, often difficult to spot and not once found completely dry. Water was filtrated through a piece of cotton but was still not obviously safe for consumption. There was the possibility that some animals could have drowned after falling into the unprotected well shafts and contaminated the water. The usual distance walked during the whole period of six weeks was $\approx 25 - 30$ km per day, with a break for people and animals during the hottest hours. The desert area from the River Atbara to the first rocky hill to be seen, Jebel Tolos (Colour plate I), visible from Wadi Okliss, was almost completely flat, covered with small stones and pebbles (Colour plate II). The only vegetation in this stretch consisted of small, thorny shrubs sparsely growing in shallow *kbors*. Huge chains of impassable sand dunes appeared close to Wadi Obak – the site of the first expected water well. The dull desert landscape was accompanied by dry, hot days and cold nights with cloudless skies. Views of the broad Wadi Barut, reached after the first week of trekking, covered with a carpet of fresh soft grass on which small herds of grazing camels wandered, made clear to us why the Beja, according to all sources, were so fond and so protective of their lands.

From Wadi Ariab, famous for its modern gold mine, many Pan-Grave-like features were to be found on the hills and

vegetation was richer still. Acacia bushes grow here much higher, and though known in the Nile valley as a not very impressive shrub, Calotrope (Arabic *usber*) in Wadi Amur grows to form dense several-metre-high forests. Climatic conditions became very different. The sky grew overcast, sometimes with heavy clouds, which as well as the higher humidity gave the impression of an approaching rainstorm. The last barrier to be passed on the way to the Red Sea coast was a chain of mountains among which was the monumental Jebel Erba (Colour plate III). The misty view of the horizon where blue sky met the blue sea as seen one day from the eastern slopes gave a promise of a happy end to the trek. It took, however, several days of walking along Wadi Tomala and Hokeib before the caravan reached the immense, empty beach on Dungunab Bay, and another day to get to Mohammad Qol where hospitable although surprised citizens offered us all the help we needed. Here the dromedaries were left under the protection of Mr Adarob – an old Amara Beja – to be kept until the next winter when the next part of the journey was planned.

On 17th December 1998 we began the second trip with camels. Originally it was planned to travel back to the Nile Valley but using another, more northerly, route and reaching the river at Abu Hamad. But since two of our female dromedaries had now small children (!) and there was no rain in the whole area during the previous summer the route had to be totally changed.

The caravan moved instead northwards. During perhaps six weeks it passed settlements at Gebeit, Sofaia, and along the wadies Oko, Hadayu, Diib, Hofra, Is and Oyo, reaching almost to the Egyptian border. Through the Wadi Hipkok the caravan came back to Gebeit where all five dromedaries were left, sold to the Bishariin Tayyeb Musa Shabadeen based in Sofaia, who was a sheikh of the Shantiraab clan. This meant the end of the journey. The second trek was much different from the first one since the topography of the region was exclusively mountainous. More often, instead of flat valleys, so huge were the boulders that the route was invisible; elsewhere it passed through narrow *kbors* and gorges filled with pebbles and sharp stones causing damage to the camels' feet.

The routes of both trips led through lands (*bilad*) populated by three huge branches of the Beja people. At the beginning Bishariin (*Umm Nagi*), then around Wadi Ariab for a short time through Hadendowa land, then a long stretch through Amara (*Atmaan*) land and then close to the Egyptian border through Bishariin (*Umm Ali*) territory again. Settlements were encountered rarely and were often abandoned. Usually they consisted of several houses made of huge trunks and twisted branches of acacia trees (Plate 3), sometimes surrounded by low fences. In some inhabited settlements, as for example Sofaia, such constructions appeared along with large semi-globular mat tents. Often, places for praying were marked on the ground with rows of stones with a niche showing the *kibla*. Graveyards placed in val-



Plate 3. A Beja house.

leys, but above levels flooded by seasonal streams and rivers, were always very carefully arranged with prominent circular stone structures surrounded by stone circles undoubtedly according to the local tradition of ancient Pan-Grave-like graves. The most impressive burial, a huge stone tumulus, located in the Wadi Aquampt, was that of the legendary 11th century Bisharin hero, Kuka (Paul 1954, 78) (Plate 4).



Plate 4. The grave of Kuka.

People were met from time to time on the “road”, not less than every second day, were always kind and ready to help with advice concerning passable routes or water wells (Front cover). They were usually single herders watching pasture and in a few cases people gathering around wells. They were always surprised but showed appreciation for two solitary Europeans travelling with camels through their land. The only obstacle to better contact was the language barrier. Most of the adults in the interior spoke only *bedawiye* without any command of Arabic. Their economy is based on breeding sheep and camels. Camel herds, however, for hundreds of years the pride of Beja were, after the disas-

trous draughts of the 1980s,⁴ still not completely reconstructed, and seemed to be replaced by less environmentally friendly flocks of sheep and goats. The sight of men dressed traditionally, armed with swords, daggers and sometimes circular shields, mounted on white camels was not unusual.

These treks were not planned as archaeological surveys, but ultimately led to an unexpected discovery. It took place in Wadi Diib (Valley of Wolves), a tributary of the huge Wadi Oko. During a break for watering camels and filling up our jerry cans with water at a locally famous well called Nurayet located at the foot of the solitary Jebel Magardi (Colour plate IV), some drawings were seen on rocks adjacent to the valley. They were not very impressive and they were not a big surprise since on the map from the 1950s was a note *rock art*. A young local man, Mr Isa, helping us at the well was asked if there were many such pictures in the vicinity. There were not, he said. Often promising notes on our maps like, for example, “ruins”, were used by cartographers to mark extremely modest relics of human activity. It was, therefore, a possibility that the note on the map concerned these few rock drawings visible from the valley. The valley, however, was covered by green bushes, locally called *adlib*. Our camels showed great fascination with them, so we decided to give them one hour or so to enjoy this food,

which then transpired not to be the best for their stomachs. We ourselves used that time to inspect the rocky area. The result was so impressive that we decided to make a camp there to have another day for studies. We soon found on huge boulders other groups of drawings. There were representations of long-horned cattle, camels and humans. The humans were equipped with bows, sticks and in one case with objects reminiscent of bolas (Colour plate V). Perhaps 50m further on we found a passage which led to a broad, enclosed valley, roughly oval in shape and measuring almost 200m along its long axis (Plate 5). Hundreds if not thousands of drawings cover rocks and boulders encircling this valley.

Single drawings depicting cattle were scattered on almost every available surface. They had been hammered and there were also friezes that appeared in groups. The most monumental one was situated almost exactly opposite the entrance to the valley (Plate

6). A herd of cattle was shown together with some scenes. There were herders equipped with sticks and bows watching cows, but also two representations showing cows being milked by women. The composition was placed on a flat rock-face which was flanked by two huge boulders covered completely in a chaotic way with representations of cows.

In another case the artist showed lines of cattle marching along a vein of quartzite, composing the scene accord-

⁴ According to some sources the droughts of the 1980s resulted in the loss of up to 95% of livestock herds in the region (Hjort af Ornäs and Dahl 1991, 132).



Plate 5. Valley of rock drawings.

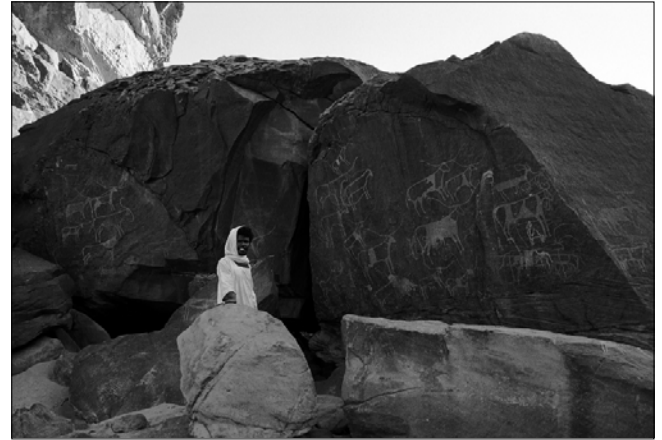


Plate 8. Isa and the rock drawings.

ing to the geological structure of the rock (Plate 7). This intention was clear although the surroundings of the scene were full of drawings hammered at different times.

Mr. Isa showed us huge boulders on another day, convinced by us that there was plenty of rock art in the area. They were covered with multiple single representations and scenes (Plate 8). One of them seemed to show a fight

between two bulls for a cow nearby, all watched by their herder equipped with his bow (Plate 9). On another side of the boulder some cows evidently had artificially trained horns.

Although representations of cattle (along with goats or sheep) were definitely predominant, some scenes depicted big game hunting and wild animals were also present. Most interesting was a perfectly drawn scene of hunting elephant (Colour plate VI). It contrasted with a much later (to judge from the level of natural patination and style) scene of an antelope hunt (Plate 10).



Plate 6. Relief with scenes of milking cows.



Plate 7. Cows marching above vein of quartzite.

Styles and especially varying degrees of patination indicated that separate drawings were created over a very long span of time. Some images appeared 'stratified', like those punched on almost flat horizontal rock surfaces. Cattle with surprisingly long bodies together with ostrich were only slightly distinguishable from the surface, but scenes of hunting ostrich by men mounted on camels, punched on top of them much later, were bright and clear (Plate 11).

Many representations of dromedaries appeared on rocks and boulders. Apart from those mentioned above, representations of evidently pregnant ones with exposed udders seem to be especially significant (Plate 9). The last aspect is a demonstration of the most important role of breeding animals, as a milk supply.⁵ Dromedaries are naturally adapted to extremely arid conditions. They replaced cattle when everyday access to water was impossible. Their use became universal and persists to our day, constituting a long tradition deeply rooted in Beja economy and culture.

⁵ Traditional local porridge (Bedawiye: *otam*), made of camel or sheep milk and crushed *durra* (sorghum) grains, has been always a basic (if not exclusive) meal in the modest Beja diet.



Plate 9. Fighting bulls (left), pregnant dromedary (upper right).

The initial examination of rock drawings at Bir Nurayet allows us to draw some conclusions. Many of the engravings are distinguished by very careful elaboration with the depiction of detailed anatomical features of animals. Artists often hammered not only silhouettes, but also different colouration on the bodies. The presence of representations of cows hammered on top of other drawings, however,



Plate 10. Hunting antelope (Ibex?).

leads to the conclusion that the aim was not aesthetic or artistic. There is no room for doubt that the place had a cultic character and that the real intention was to multiply, in a magical way, herds and flocks. This seems to be reinforced additionally by the surrounding landscape, where the isolated Jebel Magardi and adjacent enclosed valley create together natural symbols of fertility. As David S. Whittles wrote on this question in the context of North American rock art (1998, 22-23):

..... This was because the symbolism of the landscape – like that of the sites themselves – was gendered. It was based on a wide-spread directional opposition, which equated males with up /high/ mountain and female with down /low/ valley

Rock drawings appear throughout the middle Nile valley dispersed along many rocky areas of the river's banks. Those found in the north in the 1960s (see Hellström 1970) and those recorded in recent years in the Fourth Cataract¹⁰ region give evidence of diversity of the faunal environment and developed early pastoralism, well known from other archaeological sources.

Early breeding of cattle in the region of the Red Sea Hills has not previously been confirmed. In his *The Development of Nomadism in Ancient North-east Africa*, Karim Sadr states:

“Whether the A-Group had a pastoral economic sector thus remains an open question. It has been suggested that they obtained their pastoral products from specialized herders in the hinterland (according to Nordström 1972). The presence of Red Sea shells in A-Group sites may present trade with such herders east of the Nile (Hoffman 1967). Khor Daud has also been interpreted as a bartering market for the exchange of Nubian and Egyptian products (Nordström 1972). It is located in one of the richest A-Group locales near the mouth of Wadi Allaqi – the gateway to the Eastern Desert – led Nordström to the conclusion that the key to the prosperity of the A-Group culture lay in its role as intermediary in the cattle trade between Eastern Desert nomads and agriculturists of Upper Egypt (1972). Unfortunately, however, the existence of a nomadic pastoralist population in the Eastern Desert cannot be substantiated either archaeologically or textually for this period.”

(Sadr 1991, 90)

Bir Nurayet lies approximately 50km from Wadi Allaqi. Communication between them through the Wadi Is or Wadi Hofra, for example, would have been quite easy. Thus, there appears to be sufficiently strong confirmation of the hypotheses concerning the presence of early pastoralism in

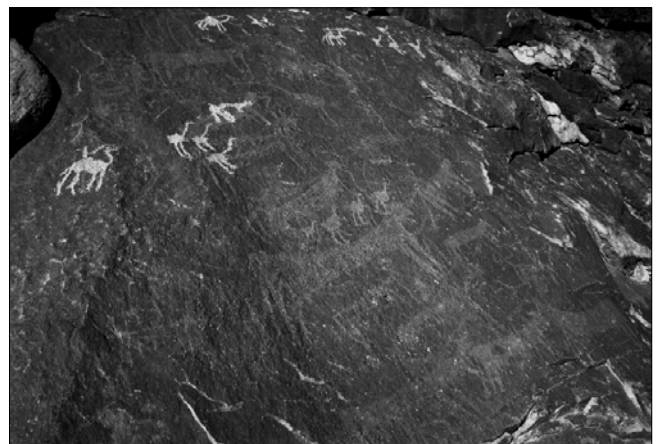


Plate 11. Stratified drawings.

¹⁰ See diverse reports in Paner and Jakobielski 2005.

this region, suggested by Hans-Åke Nordström and other scholars many years ago.

Post scriptum

The discovery of the rock art gallery at Bir Nurayet was reported by the author to the National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums of the Sudan in 1999. In 2000 it was presented during an international symposium Cultural Markers in the Later Prehistory of Northeastern Africa and Recent Research, in Puszczkowo at Poznan (Poland). After that conference Prof. Michal Kobusiewicz of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Science declared a readiness to lead an archaeological project to Bir Nurayet. In 2002 appropriate documents were signed in Khartoum concerning the archaeological concession.

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Colour plate I. Towards Bir Nurayet - The caravan approaches Jebel Tolos.



Colour plate II. Towards Bir Nurayet - Skeleton of a gazelle in the stony plain, Nubian Desert.

*Colour plate III.
Towards Bir Nurayet -
Jebel Erba.*





Colour plate IV. Towards Bir Nurayet - The caravan approaching Jebel Magardi.



Colour plate V. Bir Nurayet - Boulder with bulls and men with bolas.



*Colour plate VI.
Bir Nurayet -
An elephant hunt.*