



Sennar Capital of Islamic Culture 2017 Project. Preliminary results of archaeological surveys in Sennar East and Sabaloka East (Archaeology Department of Al-Neelain University concessions)

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Previous studies of Sennar East and Sabaloka

The study of Sudan's archaeology, developed through extensive fieldwork in the Middle Nile region of northern and Central Sudan, has been investigated by multiple approaches. Yet despite the long history of this archaeological activity, there are some regions which remain untouched, among them Sennar East and Sabaloka East (Figure 1).

However, Central Sudan and the Blue Nile were visited and described by European travellers throughout the 19th century, some of whom described the city of Sennar as a Fung settlement along with descriptions of other sites such as Islamic cemeteries (and *qubbat*) and villages. Historical notes were also written by scholars of Sudan's history, such as Tabgaat wad Daifallah (Elzein 1988, 72).

The first efforts at systematically recording archaeological sites in Sennar was undertaken by the Jebel Moya expedition in 1904 (Addison 1949, 28). Additional information comes from the exploration and rescue excavations conducted during the construction of the Sennar Dam (Arkell 1946, 91; Crawford 1951, 30; Dixon 1963, 232). Important information on Sennar and its place in north-east Africa comes from the travellers' reports, the city plan and photographs, and from people moving from Africa to Arabia through Sennar (Crawford 1951, 41; Arkell 1955, 19).

In later times, although no systematic archaeological fieldwork was carried out in the area, some Meroitic sites were reported close to Sennar Dam (Arkell 1946, 92). Our knowledge of fossil hominida comes from the discovery of the famous Singa skull and some Middle Paleolithic artifacts were collected from Singa and Abu Hugar (Stringer 1979, 80). Other fieldwork along the White and Blue Niles has shed light on the importance of the area which connected Central Sudan with east Africa and with the Eastern Desert (Arkell 1955; Fernandez 2003).

At Sabaloka, geological and geographical descriptions of the Sixth Cataract are well represented along with informative data on the archaeology (Whiteman 1971; Sadig and Almond 1974; Almond and Ahmed 1993; Suková and Varadzin 2012). Sabaloka is a gorge through the igneous complex rocks



Figure 1. Location of Sennar East and Sabaloka with other sites in the region.

located 80km downstream of the confluence of the Blue and White Niles, consisting of the rocky area of el-Daoul, Jebel Um-Marahiek and the extension of Jebel el-Jebialat el-Homor. The first historical notes on the area were written by early travellers, among them Charles Jacques Poncet who described the Fung kingdom in the area at the end of 17th century (Poncet 1709, 138). Crump recorded the area of Qarri on his return from Sennar in 1703 (Ahmed 1984, 41). In 1772 James Bruce described some villages in the Qarri area and Linant de Bellfonds in 1821 also made a description of the area, its people and their culture (Crawford 1951, 20).

The earlier efforts at systematically recording and planning archaeological sites comes from fieldwork in the area between Khartoum and Shendi, during which cemeteries of tumuli were recorded in the Hajer Alasal area (Hintze 1959, 173). The French archaeological research unit and NCAM (National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, Sudan)

also recorded and tested many sites on the eastern bank of the Nile around Sabaloka (Geus 1984, 24). At the same time survey along with some rescue excavations were carried out along the Khartoum – Atbara highway; Late Meroitic, Post-Meroitic and Christian graves were discovered along with rock art, structures and cairns (Edwards 1998, 38; Mallinson et al. 1996).

More intensive survey was undertaken between 1971 and 1983 around Geili and Jebel Jari, with extensive excavations at Geili and Saggai (Caneva 1988, 72), Mesolithic and Neolithic sites, and at other sites dated to Post-Meroitic and early Islamic periods. In addition to these efforts, some data and descriptions of the area and individual sites have been recorded by other researchers (El-Sangak 1978; Khalid 2013).

An NCAM rescue campaign has been conducted in the south of Sabaloka since 2012. This was combined with the continuing research of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic on the western bank of the Nile (Suková and Varadzin 2012, 120). Our knowledge from the previous studies in Sabaloka provided enough data to indicate that the eastern Sabaloka area held some archaeological potential and our project owes a debt to this work.

Al-Neelain University's Archaeology Department started exploration of the area in 2009 directed by Khidir Ahmed, when he established the department. Many archaeological features were observed in the southern part of the area and shed more light on the extension of archaeological sites to the north.

During 2013 archaeological survey and excavations were carried out in the area for student training, directed by the author. The area was divided into small sections for the systematic survey and landscape exploration to investigate each section and draw a general survey map. In the four seasons conducted from 2013-2016, about 32 archaeological sites were planned in the southern part of the area, mainly late prehistoric sites and late Meroitic and Medieval sites, and two were excavated (Nassr forth.).

Archaeological survey in Sennar East and Sabaloka East

As a part of the main plan of the “Sennar Capital of Islamic Culture 2017 project” Al-Neelain University's Archaeology Department conducted archaeological and ethnographical survey in Sennar East from el-Shareef Bajboj to Esuki, on the banks of the Blue Nile and in Sabaloka, north of the Sabaloka gorge to Wad Bilailo village. The project focused on these two areas as both areas are of especial importance in the earlier Islamic period in Sudan; Sennar was the capital of the Fung kingdom and Sabaloka lay within the Abdallab kingdom. The methodology of the fieldwork established to achieve the main goal of the Sennar Islamic Culture Project consists of the following:

- data collected by systematic archaeological survey and the landscape exploration

- application of probability sampling on data from the surface collection and oral history

- GIS mapping of sites and sampling surface assemblages with selective test excavation of some sites

Initially it was proposed to carry out fieldwork first in Sennar East to the east of the Blue Nile, because it was the hinterland of the kingdom based at Sennar and remained an unstudied area. The lack of a detailed topographical map of Sennar East makes it necessary to devote a few sentences to a description of the landscape and environmental conditions, in order to explain the rationale behind the division of the area into small units. The Blue Nile and the Dinder River tributaries mark the main divisions of the area between the Blue Nile and Dinder River. The main topographical features, along with the mounds lining the Blue Nile and the deep irrigation canals of the Esuki Agriculture Project, were recorded from satellite images and plotted using GIS. The size of the area and its geomorphological diversity makes it necessary to divide it into five sections according to the landscape. Archaeological sites recorded in this area from north to south exhibit a differing chronologies and settlement patterns. Permanent settlements of the Early Islamic period dominate. The remains of Islamic occupation, ruins of mosques, cemeteries with *qubbat* and other structures, and dwelling camps, are common. Meroitic graves and Christian remains were also recorded. On the banks of the Blue Nile and in the fertile area of the Esuki Agricultural Scheme, 35 archaeological sites were planned (Figure 2). The ethnographic material documented and samples collected, were mainly hunters' weapons, religious artifacts and traditional ornaments.

The archaeological survey of Sennar East revealed many archaeological sites of the Fung period adjacent to the Blue Nile. There are large settlements around el-Shareef Bajboj, small scale settlement close to Abu Geili along with Islamic cemeteries and *qubbat*. Some sites are specially situated and functioned as river harbours. The Meroitic and Christian sites were found close to the Sennar Dam and in the Esuki area. Archaeological excavations were conducted in three sites differing in their setting and context, in an attempt to gain an understanding of the archaeological sites variability in the area.

In Sabaloka the situation was different owing to the intensive survey and test excavations of the southern parts conducted in the previous three field seasons. Occupation spanned from Middle Paleolithic to the Islamic period with late prehistoric settlements and Post-Meroitic tumuli as the most prevalent sites (Nassr 2016). This season, archaeological survey was carried out to complete the distribution map of sites around the Sabaloka Gorge and in the northern mountains along with ethnographic and historical surveys in Wad Bilailo village to improve our understanding of the Fung kingdom's extension from the geographical, chronological and environmental contexts of Sennar north of Khartoum into the Abdallab chiefdom. Twenty archaeological sites were

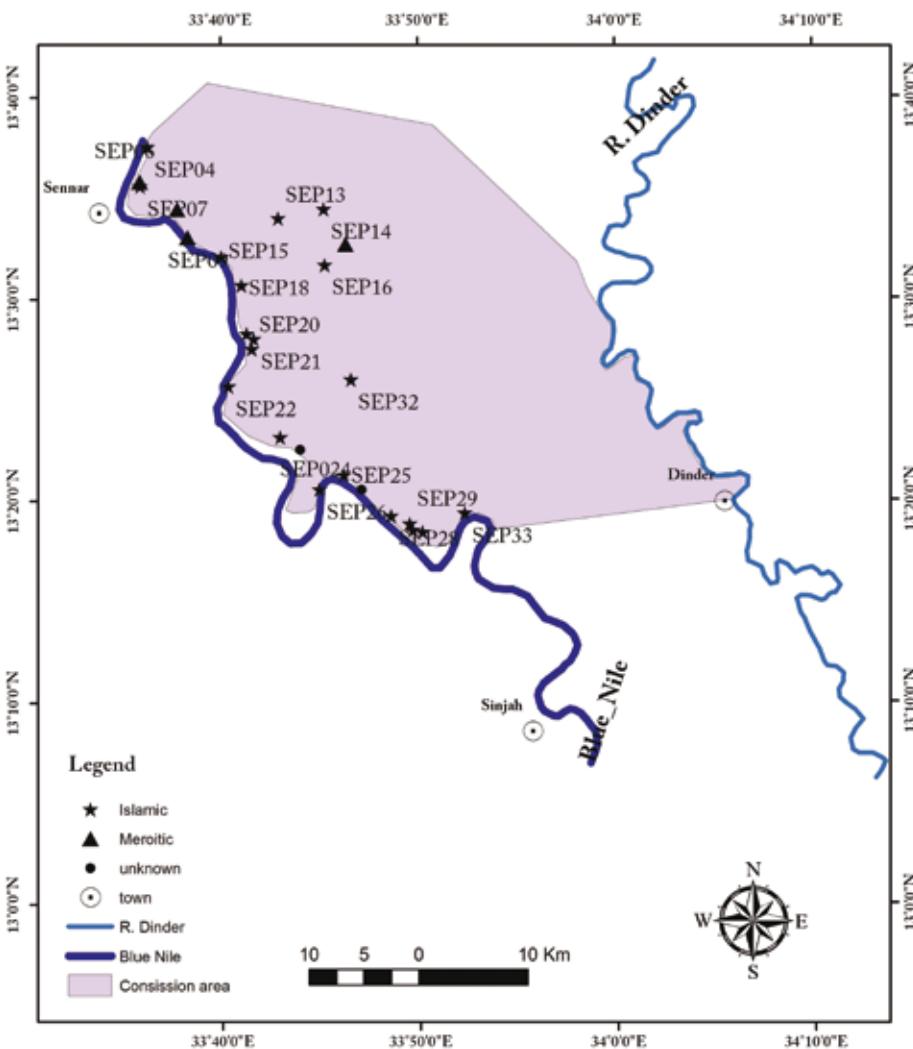


Figure 2. GIS map of archaeological sites discovered in Sennar East (drawing: Jadeen 2016).

recorded and many archaeological features described. The results of this fieldwork allow a wider understanding of the extension of the Fung kingdom. Our knowledge of Qarri village and remains of defensive camps was limited to the fact that the south of Sabaloka was the area of Abdallab movement from the Khartoum province to the Butana and the north (Crawford 1951, 51; Chittick 1963, 268).

For the exploration of the area, satellite images have been used in order to locate the archaeological features in the complex rocky terrain. Systematic walking survey was carried out in the northern mountains, artefacts were collected and the surface remains described. The sites identified during the survey consisted of more late prehistoric sites and Post-Meroitic cemeteries. Islamic sites were represented by the remains of small villages, cemeteries and *qubbat*. The classification of the assemblages collected from the surface show that the Sabaloka area was occupied from the Palaeolithic to Early Islamic period, but predominantly during the late prehistoric and the Fung period. The significance of the area comes from its location on the borderlands of Fung kingdom in Central Sudan after the combination of the Fung and Abdallab in late 1500s (Elzein 1988, 52).

Discussion of Archaeological sites in Sennar East

The results of the archaeological survey and excavations in both regions revealed that the areas were quite rich in archaeological remains. Classification of the artefact sampling has been done, in order to understand the sites' chronology and hierarchy. The main type of archaeological sites related to the Fung was the permanent settlement, as recognised from the sites' setting and size. Concentrations of pot sherds and building remains were the main finds, and many sites show evidence of sedentary settlement, such as Eldondoba site SE07. Pottery sherds were found on the surface and during excavation, among them finewares and burnished pottery (Plate 1).

A wide range of small finds made from a variety of raw materials was also recovered (Plate 2). Some of these indicate far reaching contacts with western, central and eastern Sudan.

The small camps found in many locations, contain fragments of pottery and a few indications of building remains and fire places. Usually discovered in the fertile area of the Esuki Agricultural Scheme, they are located close to a *wadi* or *khor*, well or small *hafir*. The antiquities observed on the surface range from scatters of pottery sherds to the remains of huts or fire places. One site of this type is SE21 where there are remains of small rooms delimited by mud-brick walls and fire places (Plate 3).



Plate 1. Pottery sherds and clay smoking pipes from site SE07 (photo: Nassr 2016).



Plate 2. Different types of artefacts from site SE07 (photo: Nassr 2016).



Plate 3. The small camp at site SE21 (photo: Nassr 2016).

Some sites appear to have had a special function as evidenced by their setting and the material within them. One such site, SE14 Elaskla, was found on the bank of the Blue Nile and consisted of a square building constructed from red bricks. Excavations carried out within the building revealed some fragments of Early Islamic ceramics, beads, a fragment of iron (an arrowhead or sword) and pieces of charcoal. The location of the site and the artefacts collected indicate that it was a harbour in the Early Islamic period, reused during the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (Plate 4).

The second category of site recorded in Sennar East is the



Plate 4. General view of the harbour site SE14 (photo: Nassr 2016).

cemeteries, which are common features in the area. Meroitic sites SE11 and SE26 were found close to the Sennar Dam. Test and rescue excavations were conducted to understand the depth of the sites and to rescue some eroded graves and recovered grave goods from a circular pit with the deceased in a crouched position; typical Meroitic fine bowls and jars found. Site SE11 had been noted previously during the rescue excavations associated with the construction of the Sennar Dam (Arkell 1946; Dixon 1963). Christian cemeteries were identified from the box superstructures of fired bricks at sites SE07, SE06 and SE18. Islamic cemeteries are the most common type of site in the area along with *qubbat*.

Qubbat recorded in this survey are of conical form (sites SP12 and SE22, el-Sheikh Farah Wad Taktouk and el-Sheikh



Talha) (Plate 5). This type of *qubba* dates to the Early Islamic period in Sennar (Elzein 1988).

Many Islamic cemeteries did not contain *qubbat*; some of them have a type of family grave associated with a different type of small building, the so-called *bania* (Plate 6). *Bania* are usually single-roomed buildings; an enclosure wall built of stone with the graves inside. In some cases they reuse Christian fired bricks or stone in the graves. The *qubba* and *bania* reflect the expansion of Islamic society in the area (Crawford 1951, 49).

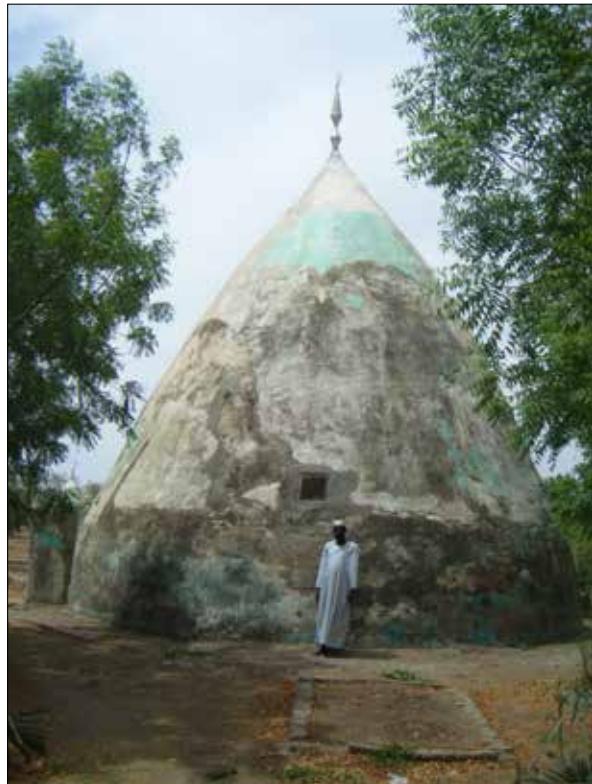


Plate 5. Conical *qubba* near Sennar (*Qubbat el-Sheikh Talha*), at site SE22 (photo: Nassr 2016).



Plate 6. Islamic family cemetery and *bania* at site SE19, el-Magie (photo: Nassr 2016).

An ethnographical survey carried out in the area confirmed that many villages have a cultural heritage related to the Early Islamic period. Religious paraphernalia are common in the villages of el-Sheikh Talha, el-Sheikh Farah Wad Taktouk and others. Hand written Holy Qurans were well represented with books of different sizes along with covers (Plate 7). Boards for writing the Holy Quran, along with pencils and ink were preserved as well as documents recording the history of the sheikh and his family.



Plate 7. A hand written Holy Quran from site SE25, Gladiema village (photo: Nassr 2016).

In addition large amounts of other traditional equipment was recorded and collected from the villages, such as Fung swords from Ronga village, where families descended from the Fung are still living today. From the villages of Umm Sofa and Hamadnallah copper vessels, swords and arrowheads were collected (Plate 8).



Plate 8. Iron swords from site SE23, Umm Sofa village (photo: Nassr 2016).

From the above general descriptions it can be concluded that in Sennar East occupation spanned from the Meroitic period up to the present, with Fung archaeological sites being the most common. Two initial settlement types were identified; permanent settlements on the banks of the Blue Nile which are of large size and rich in artefacts, and small

scale settlements, probably pastoral camps found in the fertile area of the Esuki Agricultural Scheme. Other types of site include cemeteries, some with *qubbat* and *bania*, and those with a special function such as harbours on the Blue Nile and hunting camps.

Discussion of Archaeological sites in Sabaloka

The general complexion of Sabaloka's archaeology was recognised in the first three seasons of work by Al-Neelain University and from previous studies (Nassr forth.). Twenty archaeological sites were recorded during this fourth season. Most of these were located at the foot of the so-called Jebel el-Gibialat el-Homor (small red mountain) and other settlements were found on the high mounds close to the Nile. Four types of archaeological sites were recorded in this season:

a: Small occupation areas, settlements or workshops found at the foot of the mountains, mainly prehistoric and Early Islamic sites

b: Tumuli, which are common in the area, differ in size and shape and might be of Late Meroitic and Post-Meroitic date (Plate 9). Some of the graves beneath these have been robbed and are surrounded by fragments of Meroitic and Post-Meroitic pottery. The design of these grave structures is very rare in Central Sudan, but is not dissimilar to late Meroitic and early Makurian graves in northern Sudan (El-Tayeb and Kolosowska 2005)

c: small scale settlement along the Nile banks, such as Early Islamic villages, prehistoric camps and shelters

d: archaeological features recognised from satellite images in the mountain complex flanking Sabaloka Gorge

One of the important sites in this area noted by Khidir Ahmed in 2008, which is difficult to investigate by walking survey, is within a restricted military area. This site was described by Chittick as the last Christian stronghold in Central Sudan. He described the wall construction and rooms and the circular building close by the Abdallab village remains (Chittick 1963, 266-270). This season our archaeological survey was carried out in the site called Khor Kitaira. The survey was done on the first visit; further investigation was forbidden by the military. This is a fortified settlement on the slope of the mountain, 113m above the banks of the Nile. The remains consist of a great enclosure within which is a complex of building and rooms over an area measuring 700m east-west by 350m north-south. Our survey recorded other isolated small walls and different kinds of building units. The enclosure was divided into three courtyards with complexes of rooms, circular buildings and towers. Fragments of Christian pottery were collected from the surface along with Early Islamic pottery. Tumuli were also found in the settlement along with box graves



Plate 9. Tumulus at site SP29 (photo: Nassr 2016).

constructed of stone and large red bricks. From the wall's thickness and its extent (Plate 10), this site seems to be an important settlement set on the top of hills, which rise to 486m above sea level. The elevated location indicates that it was an important place for Nile security control, perhaps a trading post, inspection point or for warfare. The indications of Early Islamic occupation of the site also observed, might suggest that it was also used by the Abdallab.

The sites discovered during the four seasons in the Sabaloka region, reflect many of the site types familiar from elsewhere in Central Sudan. The discussion of their setting and the material recovered from the surface within them reveal that Sabaloka was occupied over a long period. Although the area is rocky with limited agricultural land in the bends of the Nile, many settlement sites have been found and more sites recognised as workshops for making stone tools, as well as camps for different purposes (fortified, workshop



Plate 10. Southern walls of site SP19, Khor Kitaira (photo: Nassr 2016).



and seasonal settlement). The variations in the sites and in the artefacts found within them indicate different land use and a long period of occupation of the area.

Conclusion

The archaeological surveys of Sennar East and Sabaloka demonstrate the wide extent of Early Islamic civilization along with the presence of many archaeological sites of the earlier Kushite and Medieval periods. On the basis of catchment site analysis and resources distribution in Sennar East it is concluded that agriculture formed the mainstay of Sennar's economy. This activity must have centered on the fertile area and places close to seasonal water reservoirs, which are available in the eastern part of Sennar, for example at sites SE07, SE17 and SE22. The exploitation of these sites would indicate a permanent pattern of settlement, or long term seasonal occupation, probably similar to that prevailing in the sedentary villages lining the banks of the Blue Nile. Although no claims are made that the present-day distribution of animals and grazing is similar to that of Fung times, the small sites are indicative of temporary animal husbandry camps in the east of the Esuki Agricultural Scheme. This is confirmed by the movement of present-day pastoralists from the east to the Blue Nile. Beside that, the location of the area made it important for the movement of Muslims travelling on the Hajj.

The sites discovered in Sabaloka present evidence for the spread of the Fung during the Islamic period north of Khartoum, into the area of the Abdallab chiefdom.

A significant attribute of the Fung kingdom is its extension toward the east and north. (Crawford 1951; Arkell 1955). The fieldwork in Sennar East and Sabaloka yielded further details concerning the hinterland of Sennar and its northern borderlands in the Fung period and many traces of non-monumental permanent structures were identified. Three types of archaeological sites have been identified in both areas, including large settlements, small camps and the cemeteries some with *qubbat* and *bania*. Other sites recorded in the two areas are of Meroitic, Post-Meroitic and Medieval date, which shed more light on these areas' importance for future fieldwork.

In memory

Dr Khidir Abdelkreem Ahmed, who established the Department of Archaeology at Al-Neelain University. He passed away in 2012.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Al-Neelain University and (SCIC) Sennar Capital of Islamic Culture for funding the fieldwork. Also many thanks to my colleagues from the Archaeology Department, Al-Neelain University for participating in the field.

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