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Statement concerning Sudan

1

The Kirwan Memorial Lecture

Alloying copper, arsenic and tin – the first crucible evidence from Kerma

Frederik W. Rademakers, Georges Verly, Kylie Cortebbeck, Patrick Degryse, Charles Bonnet, and Séverine Marchi

2

Reports

A desert Middle Nubian amethyst mining camp at Wadi el-Hudi

Meredith Brand and Kate Liszka

24

Archaeological survey in the Melhab basin (Agig district), Red Sea region of Sudan: report on the 2023 field season

Amanuel Beyin, Ammar Awad M. Abdalla, Fakhri H. Abdallah Hassan, and Musaab Khair

48

A fortified site to defend the Kerma basin before the Egyptian conquest

Matthieu Honegger and Jérôme Dubosson

75

New work on landscapes of the Northern Dongola Reach

Christopher Sevara, Tim Kinnaird, Ahmed El-Ameen Ahmed El-Hassan (Sokhari) and Sam Turner

86

Kerma settlement Site P5, Northern Dongola Reach: report on the 2023 season

Steve Mills, Stephen Porter, Paul T. Nicholson, Loretta Kilroe and David Buchs

107

The Meroitic townsite of Kedurma 2023: new findings from the excavations of the cemetery

Mohamed Bashir and Claude Rilly

131

Archaeological vegetation mounds in the el-Matas area at the el-Ga'ab depression, Northern Sudan – new discoveries

Mohammed Nasreldein, Yahia Fadl Tahir and Ikram Madani Ahmed

148

Excavations in the Berber cemetery, the 2022 season and new chance discoveries in the Berber Region

Mahmoud Suliman Bashir

159

Preliminary report on the excavation of Building 1000 at Naga

Karla Kroeper and Christian Perzlmeier

172

The Isis Temple at Wad Ben Naga (WBN 300)

Pavel Onderka

188

Early Neolithic gouges from north-western Butana: new light on contacts between the Nile and its hinterlands

Ladislav Varadzin, Katarína Kapustka and Lenka Varadzinová

207

Studies

Following the footprints of a jackal from Meroe to London. The origin of British Museum EA68502

Michael H. Zach

214

Replicating prehistoric Sudan: Anthony Arkell's object casts

Anna Garnett

219

Chronology, correspondence analysis, and Lower Nubia in the 3rd century BC: a reassessment of the Meroitic cemetery at Faras Henry Cosmo Bishop-Wright	230
Giraffes at Faras – the exchange of goods and ideas across Kush Loretta Kilroe	247
Darfur focus	
Darfur. Threats and dangers to archaeological sites and possible ways to protect them Ibrahim Musa Mohamed Hamdon	257
We are all for Nyala (KAMAN), South Darfur. A note concerning a local initiative to preserve cultural heritage Ashraf Abdalla	263
The Centre for Darfuri Heritage at Nyala University: a driver for cultural development Gafar A. F. Ibrahim	265
Book reviews	287
Obituaries	291
Biographies	297
Miscellanies	302



Front cover. Block 1000.0049 from Naga (photograph courtesy Karla Kroper).

Above. Pottery jar with decoration of sorghum heads from BMC 60, Berber (photograph courtesy Mahmoud Suliman Bashir).

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Excavations in the Berber cemetery, 2022 season and new chance discoveries in the Berber Region

Mahmoud Suliman Bashir

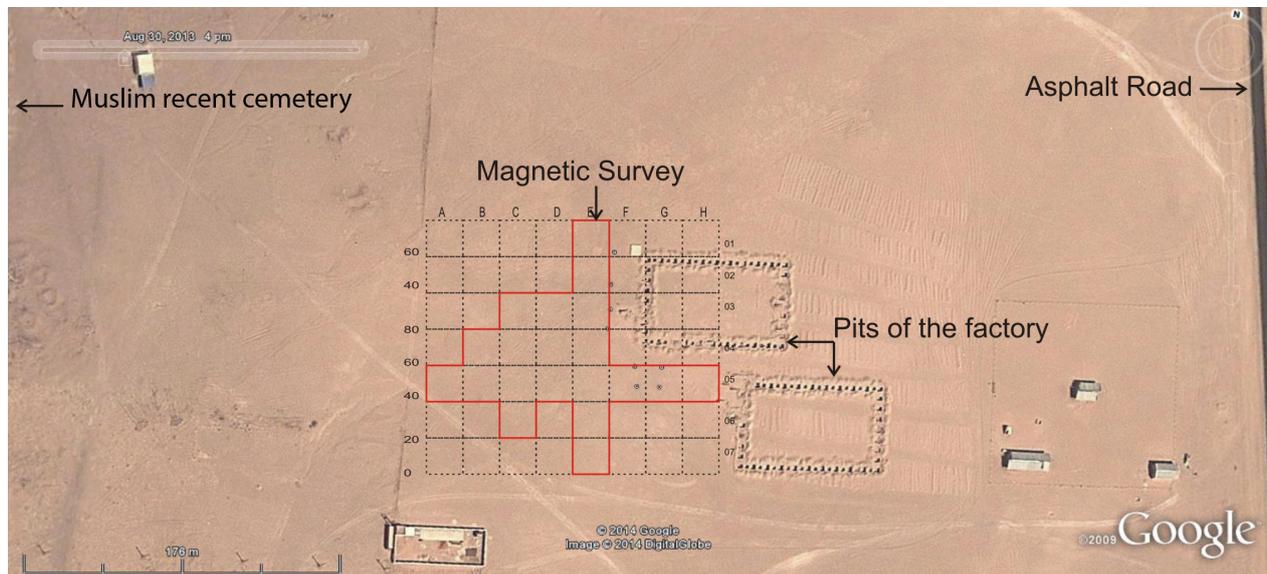


Figure 1. Magnetic survey showing burials in the Berber cemetery.

Introduction

Excavations continued in the Berber cemetery by a team from the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, Sudan (NCAM) during February-March 2022.¹ The work concentrated on clearing the surface in Square I3 using the grid installed during previous seasons (see Figure 1; Mahmoud Suliman Bashir and David 2015, 97; Mahmoud Suliman Bashir 2016). Five tombs were identified and excavated (see Figure 2; designated BMC: 59-60-61-62-63). The work also incorporated rescue excavations at Artoli, c. 30km north of Berber city following a request from NCAM to confirm information received from a citizen regarding the discovery of archaeological materials found while digging a well for irrigation.

The archaeological excavations at Berber cemetery

BMC 59

This tomb is located in Square I3 almost in the middle of Cemetery BMC. It was distinguished by the clear whitish colour of its fill, which appeared after the clearance of the surface. The structure consisted of an east-west sloping descandary 3.80m long leading to an oval shaped north-south burial chamber at the western end. The fill in the descandary was a mixture of soft clay soil and pebbles. The blocking wall consisted of mudbricks found at a depth of 1.10m and had been disturbed by a robber pit. Over the remaining wall a broken pottery jar was found on the south side.

The burial chamber was disturbed by intensive robber's activities, and human bones were scattered in the burial together with potsherds. Remains of a disturbed and incomplete skeleton were found concentrated in the north side at a depth of 1.35m. Two complete pottery bowls were found in the

¹ The team members were: Murtada Bushara (archaeologist), Mohamed Saad (physical anthropologist), Musa Al Fadul (archaeologist), Loay Shamsalolaa (archaeologist), Al Samani Iseldin (archaeologist), Ahmed Al Mustafa (technician), Rahamtalah Malik (technician), Mubarak Adam (driver), Mahmoud Al Mahi (cook), and Mahmoud Suliman (field director).

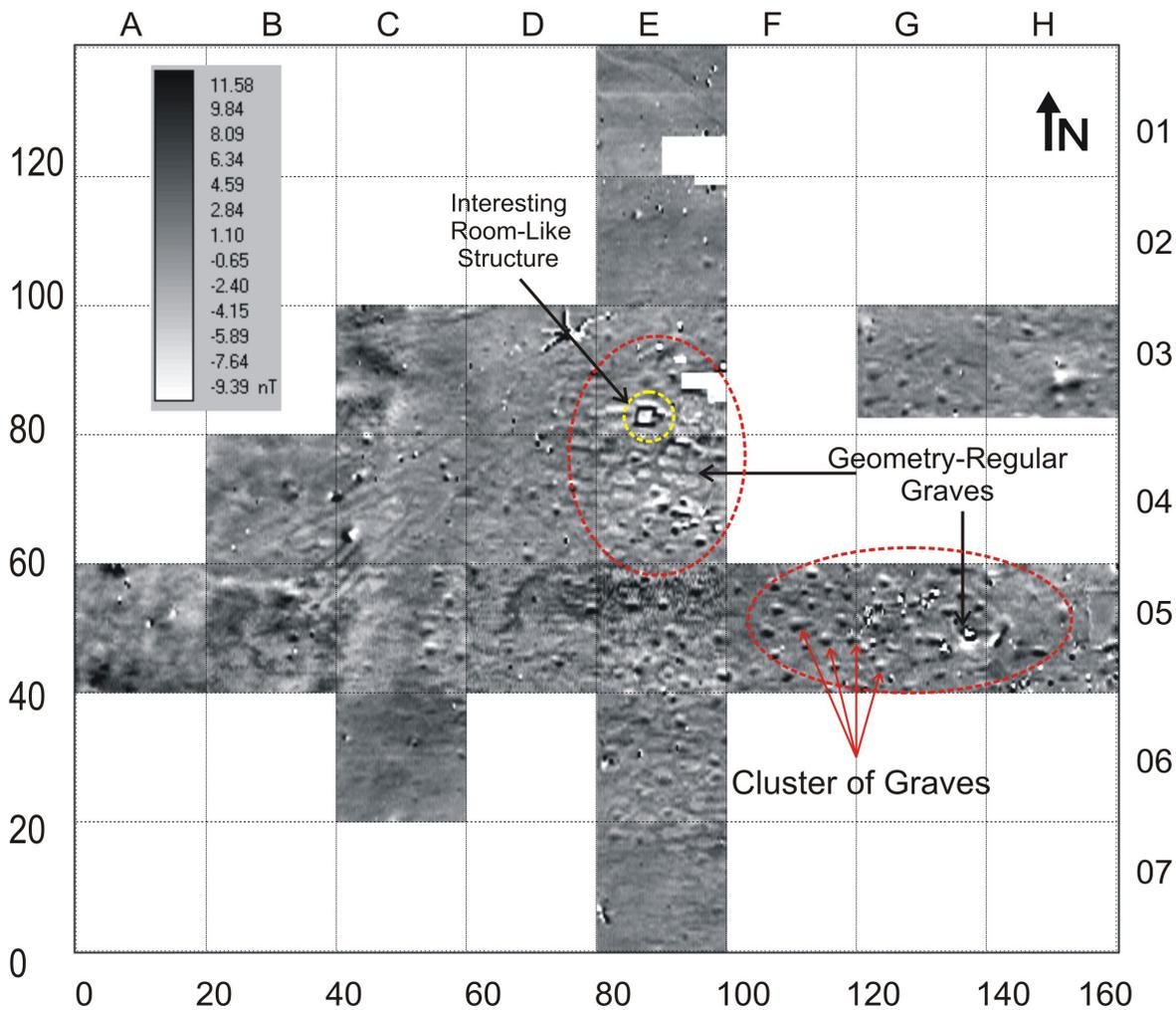


Figure 2. GIS survey showing the location of graves identified and excavated in the Berber cemetery.

south side of the burial. Under this disturbed layer the legs and ribs of the skeleton were found articulated in a contracted position orientated north-south.

During the final cleaning of the burial another articulated skeleton was found in an extended position lying beneath the disturbed one. It was orientated north-south, with the head to the south detached from the body, and with the mandible found over the chest area. The left hand, wearing an iron finger ring, was extended over the pelvis, while the right hand rested beside the head. Two pottery bowls were found with this second skeleton.

BMC 60

This tomb is located south of BMC 59, in Square I3 and extending into Square H3. The structure consisted of an east-west sloping descandary 3.50m long leading to an oval-shaped north-south burial chamber at the western end. The fill in the descandary was a mixture of soft clay soil, sand, pebbles, and potsherds. The blocking wall consisted of two rows of mudbricks found at a depth of 0.6m. The blockage was partially disturbed by a robber pit, and there were potsherds and fragments of mud bricks in the robber pit fill. A complete pottery bowl was found upside down over the first row of the blockage at a depth of 0.95m.

The burial chamber was found partially disturbed. It was an oval-shaped niche orientated north-south located in the western end of the descandary. Two disturbed and incomplete skeletons were found; however, based on the still articulated bones they had been laid in a contracted position on the left side with the head to the south.



Figure 3 a, b. Pottery jar with decoration of sorghum heads from BMC 60.

The funerary assemblage shows this was a rich tomb. There were five pottery jars of different size and type. Among these is one black handmade jar with a clear impressed decoration of sorghum heads on the belly (Figure 3 a, b). This jar provides additional support for the important role of sorghum in the region of Berber (Edwards 2014; Mahmoud Suliman Bashir 2013, 99).

BMC 61

This tomb is located east of BMC 59. It consisted of a 4.70m long east-west descendary leading to an oval-shaped burial chamber at the west end. The fill in the descendary was a mixture of clay soil and lime gravel, and contained potsherds. The blocking wall of mud bricks was found partially disturbed by a robber pit at a depth of 1.30m.

The burial chamber was disturbed by robbers. It is an oval-shaped niche orientated north-south. Two skeletons were found completely disturbed. The funerary assemblage consisted of three pottery jars and eight bowls found scattered around the burial chamber (Figure 4).

BMC 62

This tomb is also located in Square I3. It was distinguished by the clear whitish colour of its fill visible after the clearance of the surface. The structure of the tomb consisted of an east-west sloping descendary 4.30m long leading to an oval-shaped, north-south burial chamber at the western end. The fill in the descendary was a mixture of soft clay soil with a small proportion of pebbles. There were offerings in front of the blockage consisting of four pottery jars and five bowls, almost all in a semi upside down position (Figure 5). The blocking wall behind the external offerings was well-built consisting of three rows of mud bricks found at a depth of 0.84m. The upper row of the blockage was missing and there were clear traces of a robber pit on the north side above the blockage.

The burial chamber was partially disturbed and two skeletons were found. The first was articulated in a good state of preservation. It was found in a contracted position on the left side orientated north-south, the head to the south, facing west. Part of the blockage had collapsed over this skeleton (Figure 6). The second skeleton was found disturbed in the north side of the burial.

The funerary assemblage indicates a rich but partially plundered tomb. It consisted of two black handmade pottery jars and one red wheel-made jar. One fine-ware cup was found to the west of the legs and another pottery cup behind the body. A copper-alloy bowl was found in front of the body on the west side. A glass kohl container was found behind the head, and four additional pottery bowls on the north-west side. Underneath the skeleton remains of a dark-coloured brown/black textile were found.



Figure 4. Funerary assemblage in the burial chamber of BMC 61.



Figure 5. Offerings in front of the blockage in BMC 62.



Figure 6. Burial chamber in Tomb BMC 62 shows collapsed mud brick over skeleton.

BMC 63

This tomb was distinguished by the clear whitish colour of its fill visible after the clearance of the surface. The structure consisted of an east-west sloping descandary leading to an oval-shaped north-south burial chamber at the west end. The fill in the descandary was a mixture of soft clay and sand soil. It was more concentrated at the west end, where a broken pottery bowl and some potsherds were found in the filling. A complete pottery stand was found in front of the blockage, probably the result of robber activities rather than placed as an offering (Figure 7). The blocking wall consisted of two rows of mudbricks; the lower was on the descandary while the upper was in a vertical position and leant slightly to close the burial niche. The blockage was disturbed partially by a robber pit (Figure 8).

The burial chamber was disturbed on the north side where we had noticed the robber pit; however, the south side was intact. An articulated skeleton found in the south side of the niche in a semi-contracted position on the left side orientated north-south with the head to the south, facing west. The right hand rested under the jaw and the left hand was in front of the face. The funerary assemblage consisted of a line of seven pottery jars and one large bowl situated in front of the cut step and along the back of the skeleton. Four pottery bowls were found in the north side of the burial and in addition, a green glass bottle was found in front of the body and a wooden kohl container to the north of the feet (Figure 9).

A new chance discovery at Artoli, north Berber

During our field season at Berber in March 2022, we received information regarding the discovery of an archaeological site in Artoli village. The Artoli area is located c. 30km north of Berber towards Abidiya, upstream of the 5th cataract. This area has very good archaeological potential and yet almost no archaeological research has been done here. The lack of archaeological work in the area is primarily because of protests held against the building of the proposed Shereik Dam. In response to this information the team visited the area and conducted a rescue excavation at a cemetery site possibly dated to the



Figure 7. Possible pottery stand in BMC 63.



Figure 8. Blockage in BMC 63.



Figure 9. Rich funerary assemblage in BMC 63.

Kerma period. Our visit to the newly discovered site provided further information demonstrating the archaeological richness of the area, despite it being partially damaged by local farmers' activities.

The rescue excavations at Artoli

The site is located west of the Berber-Abu Hamad highway and north-west of the Artoli check point. The site is scattered over a plain, its surface covered by pebbles. No archaeological features can be seen on the surface, and it is human activity, digging a well for an agricultural irrigation project, that was responsible for this chance discovery. The rescue work focused on two tombs that had been cut whilst digging the well, which can be seen in the north profile of the large pit (Figure 10). In addition, the clearance of the area behind the disturbed tombs revealed additional tombs.

Tomb 1

This tomb is located in the north-east corner of the well. Some objects had been found by locals whilst digging of the well and were given to us (Figure 11). The tomb was destroyed completely and no clear shape of the burial cut could be identified. However, while cleaning the filling some Kerma-like potsherds and stone beads were found. Our work then concentrated on inspecting the area around the tomb in order to find further intact tombs. Tomb 4 was discovered to the north of Tomb 1.

Tomb 2

This tomb is located in the north-west side of the well, but it was deemed too risky to work here. Therefore, work concentrated on inspecting the area around the tomb in order to find other intact burials (Figure 12). As a result, two tombs (5 and 6) were found north of Tomb 2.

'Tomb 3'

This was a test trench excavated to the north-east of the well where a mound of gravel, potentially indicating a tomb, was observed. No traces of a tomb were found.



Figure 10. Tombs cut by well pit at Artoli.



Figure 11. Objects found by locals, most probably from Tomb 1 at Artoli.



Figure 12. Inspecting the area looking for more tombs at Artoli.

Tomb 4

This tomb was discovered north of Tomb 1. It comprised an oval-shaped pit filled with soft clay soil mixed with lime gravels. An articulated skeleton was found at a depth of 1.58m, in a contracted position on its left side, orientated east-west, with the head to the east facing south, hands resting in front of the face (Figure 13).

The funerary assemblage consisted of a broad, decorated pottery dish found in front of the head to the south, and a cow horn east of the head. There was also some ash beneath the head. A burial of a child in small oval-shaped pit, orientated north-south, was found on the western side of the pit. It was in a poor state of preservation.

Tomb 5

This tomb is located north of Tomb 2. It is an oval-shaped burial filled with clay soil and lime gravels. A skeleton was found at a depth of 1.07m in a contracted position on its left side, the head to the south facing west, the hand beneath the jaw, and with legs against the chest (Figure 14). Under this skeleton and at a depth of 1.65m, we found a second skeleton in a semi-contracted position on its left side. The legs were almost at a right angle to the body, the head to the east facing south.

The funerary assemblage indicated it was a rich tomb (Figure 15). Grave goods consisted of pottery jars and bowls, with some pots found inside others. Other finds consisted of a lower grinding stone of quartz, disc-shaped beads of ostrich egg shell, a Nile oyster shell fragment and a cowrie shell, all found surrounding the skeleton.

Tomb 6

This tomb was found west of Tomb 5. It was also an oval-shaped burial. In the fill we found an ivory bracelet. A skeleton was found disturbed at a depth of 1.43m, with a clear concentration of bones in the west side of the tomb chamber. In the middle of the tomb at a depth of 1.75m, we found the skeleton of a child in a contracted position. There were two pottery baby feeders beside the child. A cow horn was found over the head of the adult burial, and a pottery bowl, disc-shaped beads of ostrich egg shell, and part of lower grinding stone of granite was situated in the south side of the tomb (Figure 16). In the burial fill, some potsherds, possibly of Kerma date, were also found (Figure 17).



Figure 13. Skeleton in Tomb 4 at Artoli.



Figure 14. Upper burial in Tomb 5 at Artoli.



Figure 15. The lower burial in Tomb 5 at Artoli shows a rich funerary assemblage.

Concluding remarks: a Kushite presence in the Berber region

Excavations in the recently discovered Kushite cemeteries in Berber, el-Fereikha, Enapis, and Artoli in the region of Berber above the Fifth Cataract reveal the potential of the area for new research. To date, archaeology in the area has mainly been associated with the Meroitic period, but the newly discovered sites provide evidence for an earlier Kushite presence dated to the Napatan and perhaps even Kerma periods. The existence of different cemeteries over a distance of c. 50km along the east bank of the Nile presents an opportunity to gain further understanding of Kushite society and its presence in the region. The burial traditions in the cemeteries at Berber, el-Fereikha, Enapis, and Artoli show similarities and



Figure 16. Burial and funerary assemblage in Tomb 6 at Artoli.



Figure 17. Kerma potsherds from Artoli.

their use of the same burial grounds for long periods demonstrates continuity. The geographical location may have facilitated easy access to overland routes, and when combined with the existing resources in the region, may have increased its significance to the state. Napatan graves with rectangular-shaped tombs with skeletons in semi-flexed positions were discovered in the cemetery at Berber and also at Enapis (Murtada Bushara *et al.* 2017, 132). The presence of Napatan graves may reflect the importance of the region during the earlier Kushite period. This area, which has been suggested as being an important place for trade during the Meroitic kingdom (see further Mahmoud Suliman Bashir 2015), possibly played the same role during the Napatan period. In addition, the royal Napatan statues discovered at the major Meroitic centre of Dangeil (Anderson and Salah eldin Mohamed Ahmed 2009, 84) are an indicator of the area's importance during the Napatan period and suggest that it was distinctive in some way. Similar statues were found at the religious centre of Napata (Jebel Barkal) and further north at Doukki Gel, ancient Pnubs (Jebel Barkal: Dunham 1970; Reisner 1917; 1931; Doukki Gel: Bonnet and Valbelle 2005). It might be suggested that the Berber area may have been a station on, or somehow linked to, the coronation route of the Kushite rulers, which took them to Napata, Kawa, Pnubs and Tare (Török 1997, 220-234).

The contracted burial position of the deceased in narrow circular pits is also common in the Berber region, and may be linked to the use of this position in earlier periods. This type of tomb is associated with presence of Kerma pottery in the Artoli (Figure 17) and Enapis cemeteries (Murtada Bushara *et al.* 2017, 132), and also in el-Fereikha (Anderson *et al.* 2018, 113).

Based on these recent discoveries and associated finds, consideration might be given to the suggestion that the Berber region was an administrative centre with state controlled economic activities taking place here during the Kushite period. It was probably an attractive area for a large part of the population because of its diverse economic resources, some of which are still utilised today. There are large, flat expanses of land for farming along the east bank of the Nile and today there are a considerable number of big agricultural projects here. The Berber region is also a core zone for gold mining and desert routes, probably connecting the riverine people with the gold mines in the Eastern Desert. It is likely that historically the region of Berber played an important role in linking the Eastern Desert with the Nile, and the Island of Meroe with the northern part of the kingdom.

The clear archaeological importance of the Berber region and the area of the Fifth Cataract has so far come to light largely by chance discoveries, but this region is now threatened by various investment projects, the extension of agricultural lands, and from the development and expansion of villages along the Nile. These are clear challenges that need to be solved through extra coordination between the multiple institutions involved with issues of land use, however it is difficult for this to happen under the current circumstances in the country.

Acknowledgments

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