



# Excavations at a Rock-Cut Tomb at Difoï (Third Cataract) with an Early Meroitic Graffito

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Map 1. Approximate location of DFF012; some modern towns (black) and ancient sites (red) indicated (modified from Google Earth).

The University of Arizona has a long history of archaeological research and excavation along the Nile River; however, until 2017 this work did not extend into Sudan. With the



Plate 1. Shaft in January 2017.

permission of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, a small team<sup>1</sup> under the direction of the author made the university's first foray into Sudan, surveying and excavating at and around a disturbed rock-cut shaft with presumed tomb of presumed New Kingdom construction, at Difoï, near the Kajbar rapids, approximately halfway between Sesebi and Tombos (Map 1).

The shaft of a 'large New Kingdom tomb' at Difoï was identified at least as early as 2001 (Edwards and Osman 2001), and it was later termed "DFF012" in a comprehensive survey of the region (Edwards and Osman 2011). At the time the tomb was initially surveyed, in the 1990s, the stone slabs covering the top of the shaft had already been broken and set aside (Plate 1), leaving the "shaft exposed" but "yet to be excavated" (Edwards and Osman 2001, 22). Using the published survey records, the author made a preliminary visit to the site on 10 January 2017. From 16 June to 25 June, a small team returned to conduct the excavations reported below.

The intent of the work was several-fold: 1) to develop a better understanding of this seemingly stand-alone tomb on an outcrop overlooking a large swath of the Nile (discussed below); 2) to evaluate if quality archaeological fieldwork can be safely conducted during the summer and at this location (the summer season being the University of Arizona's traditional period of excavation, when students are available to participate between semesters); and 3) to develop, for future seasons, a fuller understanding of the particulars and procedures of excavating in Sudan.

While the shaft was in essentially the same condition as the

<sup>1</sup> Abd El-Khaleg oversaw the work on behalf of NCAM, and we are grateful for his assistance with a wide variety of matters. The 2017 field crew consisted of Pearce Paul Creasman, Tori L. Finlayson, Jeffrey Jones (Archaeology Southwest [Tucson, Arizona, USA]), and Helen O'Brien (Pima Community College [Tucson, Arizona, USA]). Post-field processing was conducted by team members and Daniel Montoya (Pima Community College).



Plate 2. The tomb on a small ridge, flanked by wadis.

prior January, it quickly became apparent that since Edwards and Osman identified the site, it had been subjected to illicit digging. That is, the shaft, which as of sometime around 2001 remained uncleared, had been heavily disturbed and mostly emptied. Small and shattered ancient artifacts (primarily ceramic sherds, including what appear to be fragments of beer jar[s] and possibly ringstand[s]) consistent with a New Kingdom date marked the surface around the mouth of the shaft, but these were mixed with other ancient ceramic fragments ranging from the Kushite to Christian periods, as well as modern refuse (e.g., plastic cigarette wrappings). Few ancient or historic artifacts of any kind were found within the shaft or tomb, and none was in what might be considered an ancient context. Yet, several modern items used during the relatively recent unauthorised digging (e.g., 3M-brand dust masks with a manufacture date of 2012, broken digging gear, sandbags) were recovered near the shaft/central chamber threshold. In short, the shaft and parts of the tomb were heavily disturbed sometime in the past decade, but it is not certain if this was the first such event.

It was decided that the entire tomb could not be safely and properly excavated either in the short period of this exploratory season or without substantial additional labour. As the field season took place during both Ramadan and height of summer, no additional field assistance could be hired from the local area, which limited the scope of the intended work to: A) surveying the surface area immediately surrounding the shaft for additional features; B) excavating three small units on the surface, immediately outside the shaft itself, to recover any

archaeological remains scattered there in the sand piles, which presumably originated from within the tomb; C) excavating the shaft; D) excavating the western chamber, existence of which was apparent as a result of informal digging at the site sometime in the recent past; and E) using sondage to obtain the likely maximal dimensions of the primary tomb chamber. The results of this work are described below.

### Surface Survey and Excavation (Goals A & B)

In an effort to determine if this feature stood alone on its narrow ridge overlooking the bend in the Nile River (Plate 2), a transect survey was conducted. Working an area of approximately 30ha, with DFF012 at its approximate centre, the team identified no new features of suspected ancient archaeological/cultural origin apart from several indeterminate-era etchings made on sandstone slabs, including a set of etched 'footprints' found approximately 15m southwest of the shaft. At least ten instances of modern/recent historic digging (i.e., by means of large mechanical tools) of natural mounds were noted, likely in search of further archaeological features or mineral deposits.

As the surface in this region is jagged and has a thin (c. 1-3cm) layer of sand deposits over the bedrock, with the aid of brooms, we swept ten units of 5m<sup>2</sup> each in the vicinity of the shaft opening (Figure 1, Plate 3). This was undertaken in order to search for any indications of the creation of the shaft, its use/reuse, or other episodes in the historical narrative (e.g., camp site, tool-working station). These units were entirely devoid of material culture.

What was presumably the fill from the shaft itself is now concentrated mostly on the southern and eastern side of the shaft's entry at the surface. Into this low, windswept mound, we excavated three 2 x 1m units (see Figure 1 and Plate 4). These units yielded no diagnostic sherds and little else by

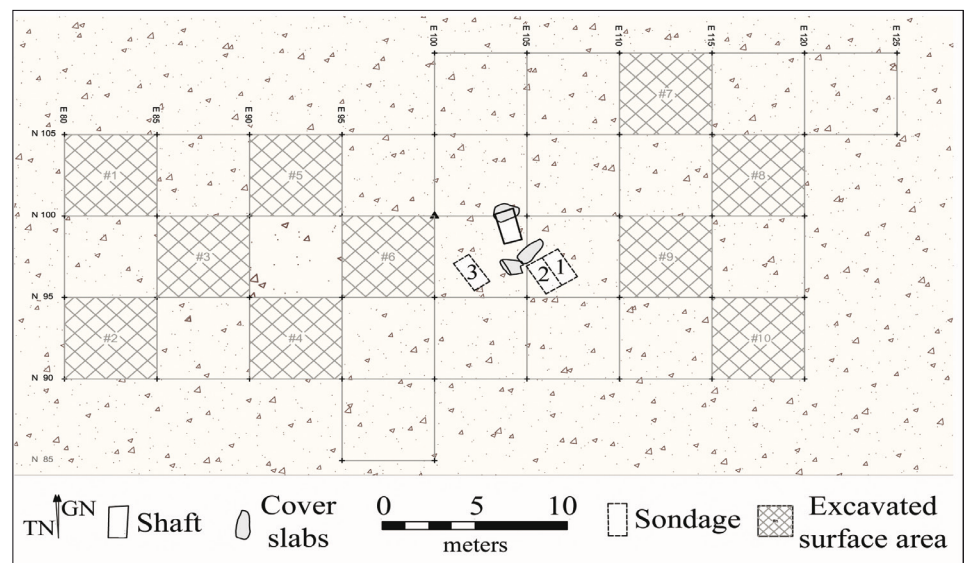
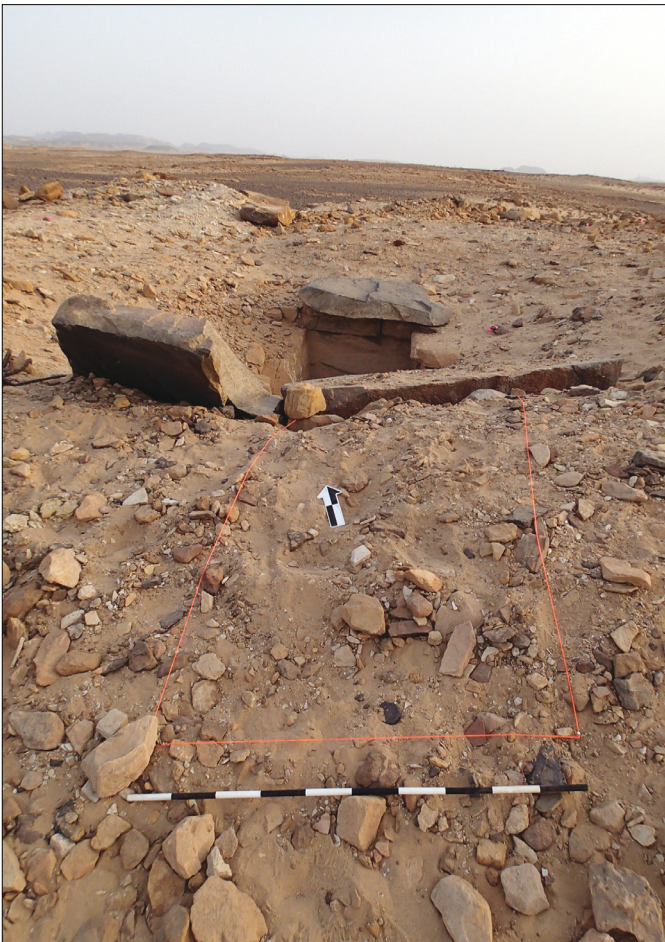


Figure 1. Map of the site and excavations (H. O'Brien).



*Plate 3. Swept surface units around the shaft.*

way of material culture from which we might reconstruct any temporal series of events indicating their formation (i.e., if they were the result of ancient, historical, or modern entry to this feature). Given the harsh winds that whipped across the site each day, it is likely that these mounds were considerably



*Plate 4. One of three units excavated in the debris mound immediately outside the shaft.*



*Plate 5. Shaft as found on arrival in June 2017.*

larger upon creation and were subsequently diminished over the years, resulting in the relative concentration of surface finds noted by Edwards and Osman and (2011, 250).

In summary, there was little material culture on the surface in the immediate area of or in areas adjacent to the shaft tomb, and its frequency declined with distance from the shaft. Given the otherwise barren nature of the immediate area, it is reasonable to assume that those materials on the surface near the shaft are associated with it in some way. However, as virtually no meaningful stratigraphy could be reconstructed in the shallow sands and the wide temporal range of the few items, it is not possible to offer any interpretations or conclusions from these with confidence.

### **Excavation of the Shaft (C)**

While the three large (*c.* 2.3 x 1 x 0.3m) black stone (likely schist) cover pieces that once enclosed the shaft had been cracked and opened, and two were set to the side of the entry many years prior to our field season (one portion remains perched over the northern wall of the shaft; see Plates 1 and 4, Figure 1), as recently as the opening of the present millennia the shaft was reported to still be unexcavated (Edwards and Osman 2001, 22). As of January 2017, the shaft was nearly empty and its fill consisted primarily of *c.* 1.7 vertical metres of stones and sand collected at the bottom of the shaft, concentrated at its southern wall. The shaft was recorded in a substantially similar state in June 2017 (Plate 5), including with an orthophotographic record assembled and made navigable as a three-dimensional space (e.g., Plate 6; digital file available on request). The shaft measured 2.28 x 1.06 x 4.85m across its central axis (see Figure 2). The depth reached 5.10m in the northeast and northwest corners, owing to a surface built up to support the slab. Length and width of the shaft each displayed some small amount of variance throughout the shaft, based primarily on breakage of the bedrock, but



Plate 6. Screen-shot of orthophotographic recording (H. O'Brien).

the figure of 2.85 x 1.8m provided by Edwards and Osman (2011, 250) cannot be explained unless they measured the surface outside the edges of the *in situ* covering slab. Despite this discrepancy, there is, however, no doubt that this is the same tomb, based on locational and photographic records.

After being cleared of all sand, stone fragments, and modern debris (Plate 7), the shaft itself yielded two features: six toe/handholds cut into each side wall (see Plates 5, 6 and 8); each hold, which is approximately 500mm distant (likely one cubit [520mm] apart,  $\pm$  wear and tear) from that above and below, is paired with, but slightly offset, a counterpart on the opposite side of the shaft. These were presumably created during the ancient period, given the similarity between their wear patterns and the size of the chisel used to cut them and those of the remainder of the shaft.

The second feature of significance is a graffito carved into the southern wall of the shaft, approximately halfway between the surface level and bottom of the shaft (Plate 8, Figure 3). Per Claude Rilly (personal communication, 14 May 2019):

*The inscription is unmistakably Meroitic, although two signs are of uncertain reading. The graffito has been engraved on a surface previously marked with oblique crosshatch lines, which are in some places difficult to distinguish from the sign outlines, but most of the characters are legible.*

*I am joining a facsimile and a tentative transliteration (where the doubtful signs, *te* and *q* are rendered in dotted letters). I cannot translate it nor find in it lexical elements that would*

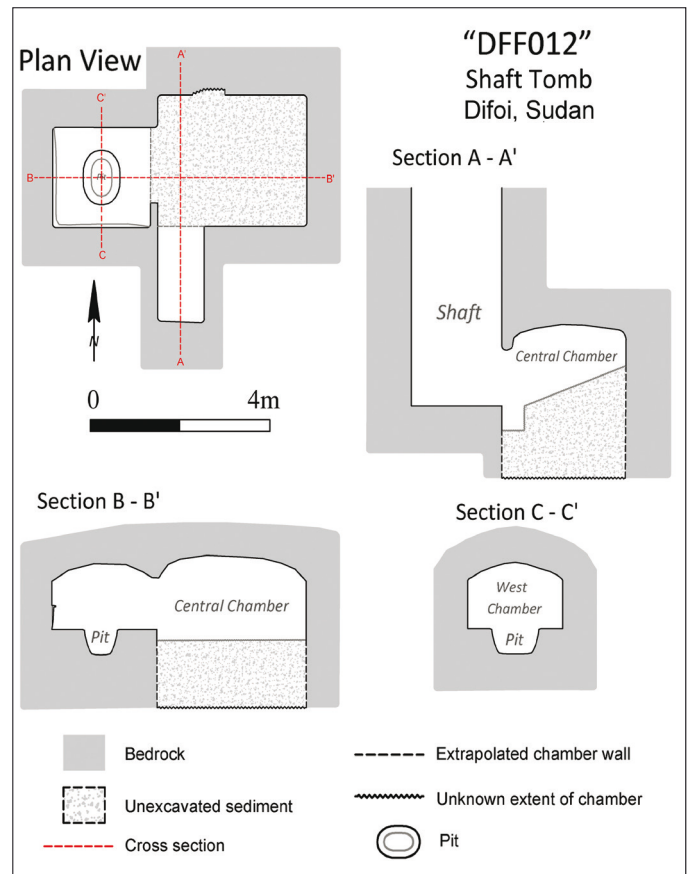


Figure 2. Preliminary plans of the shaft and chambers (D. Montoya and H. O'Brien).

*be known. It might be a proper name.*

*A significant point is the paleographical features of the signs, particularly the *w* and *e*-signs (it is unclear, it might as well be the sequence *t + i*). They point to an early date (at least for Meroitic inscriptions), probably the 2<sup>nd</sup> century or early 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.*

## Excavation of the Chambers (D and E)



Plate 7. Shaft after excavation.



Plate 8. Meroitic graffiti and its location.

In addition to the summer heat, the presence of rodents, bats, and a *c.* 50mm-thick layer of exceedingly fine dust/silt that limited visibility to near zero when disturbed (e.g., during excavation) contributed to a reduced capacity for reliable and expedient excavation. Only two chambers could be confirmed; however, an additional feature beyond the central chamber, to the north, likely exists. A preliminary plan of the tomb is provided (Figure 2).

The threshold of the central chamber was cleared in order to begin working inside the feature itself (Plate 9). A cut in the upper right (northeast corner) of the threshold appears to be a later intrusion into the tomb, possibly to reduce the volume of sand/stone that later entrants needed to clear to gain access.

Inside, it was apparent that the presumed tomb has at least two chambers. Excavation of the primary (central) chamber was not completed, but four corners could be identified at the roof level, providing at least a basic possible shape and size: 2.78m north/south, 3.31m east/west, and a minimum depth of 3.0m obtained from a *c.* 1m wide x 4m long sondage along the southern wall. Only modern refuse was found in

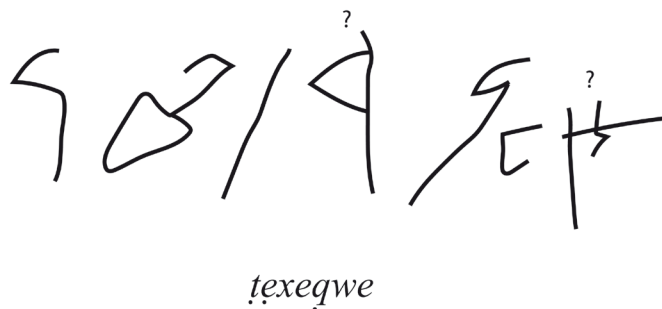


Figure 3. Facsimile of graffiti (C. Rilly).

the portions of the central chamber excavated.

A western chamber was visible upon entry to the central chamber; the western chamber was excavated in its entirety (Plate 10). The western chamber measured 2.11 (north-south) x 2.18m (east-west), with a maximum height of 1.27m near the middle of the room, sloping to 1.02m in the corners (see Figure 2). The roughly oval-shaped opening into the western chamber from the central chamber measured 1.56m wide (north-south). A 0.54m-deep pit was cut near the centre of the room, measuring 1.15 (north-south) x 0.81m (east-west) and tapering toward the bottom. The pit, like the rest of the western chamber, was devoid of material cultural - ancient, historic, or modern. A small ledge rings the southern and western walls of the chamber, but it is likely the result of breaks in the rock rather than an intentionally created feature.

Upon request, the shaft was left open and uncovered, as we had found it upon our arrival. However, we created low stone cairns around it, to serve as a warning for any animals wandering in the area.

### Context and Preliminary Conclusions

The shaft and chambers excavated present an interesting puzzle. Little in the way of material culture was found in the shaft, in the fully excavated western chamber, in the portions of the main chamber excavated, or on the surface. The total register of material culture (excluding what is obviously modern [e.g., plastics, rubbish]) recovered during the excavation comprised fewer than 50 ceramic sherds, eight bone fragments recovered from the surface (none of which was larger than 40 x 20 x 10mm), a bronze tool (?) fragment, one possible dab of plaster (40 x 30 x 10mm), and one sherd of a presumed bowl or cup with an indeterminate residue (to date, we have not been able to confidently identify a period of manufacture). All of these materials were found in heavily disturbed locations, lacking anything resembling a discernable stratigraphic profile. While excavations around the shaft at the surface and in the main chamber were not complete, the mere



Plate 9. Entry of central chamber from shaft.



Plate 10. Western chamber with pit.

construction of such a large feature should have produced more waste in breakage and remainders than was found. The same may be said for subsequent activities here: use(s) of the feature as a burial site, any later reuse, and pillaging.

With virtually no material culture in a context deemed likely to be representative of the feature's use/reuse prior to the modern period, the preliminary interpretation offered here is based heavily on other evidence. Specifically, the shaft's shape, dimensions, form, and general features (footholds, stone cap) closely resemble those of tombs in the region that are of New Kingdom construction date (e.g., Minault-Gout and Thill 2012, Vol. 1, 48-50). Some of these tombs of similar size and design housed the burials of more than 25 individuals and were in recurrent use/reuse for periods exceeding 700 years (i.e., Budka 2017, 126-127). This does not appear to have been the case with the Difoï tomb. Indeed, the western chamber of the Difoï tomb was sterile, yielding not a single sherd, whereas the western chamber of a tomb of similar size and shaped, Tomb 26 SAC5 at Sai Island, held 11 adults and three infants with considerable burial equipment (Budka 2017, 124). The central chamber at Difoï is similar in exterior dimensions to the main chamber of Tomb 26, but at Difoï it is at least 1m taller, representing considerably more effort to create.

Although this brief exploratory excavation of the shaft and chambers at Difoï ('DFF012') did not reveal evidence of an associated superstructure, evidence of plastered interior surfaces, indications of walled/sealed internal chambers, or direct indication of burial(s), the significant investment represented by the feature's original construction, plan, and dimensions suggests that it was created during the New Kingdom to serve as a tomb. After this time, the next evidence for entry into the tomb is marked by the early Meroitic graffito inscribed halfway down the shaft. That at least the shaft was partially open in about the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC is clear, but the tomb's subsequent history is not. Mention of the tomb in the

archaeological survey of the region suggests that it could have stayed in this semi-exposed state, perhaps unentered, until quite recently. The limited archaeological remains support such an interpretation, as modern evidence of entry is the only kind found with certainty (e.g., dust masks and similar objects), but they do not mandate such an interpretation.

Given the limited evidence available at present, two equally plausible but opposing hypotheses seem reasonable:<sup>2</sup> 1) The tomb was used in antiquity for a single primary occupant (or multiple burials in a single interment event) whose body remains in the farthest reaches of the tomb. 2) The tomb was abandoned and did not ultimately house a burial(s). A return to Difoï to complete excavation of the main chamber is needed to fully understand the history of this isolated feature.

### Acknowledgements

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<sup>2</sup> Other possibilities exist, of course, including thorough robbing in antiquity, but they are far less likely based on the evidence recovered.