The archaeological site of Damboya in the Shendi reach. First season

Marc Maillot

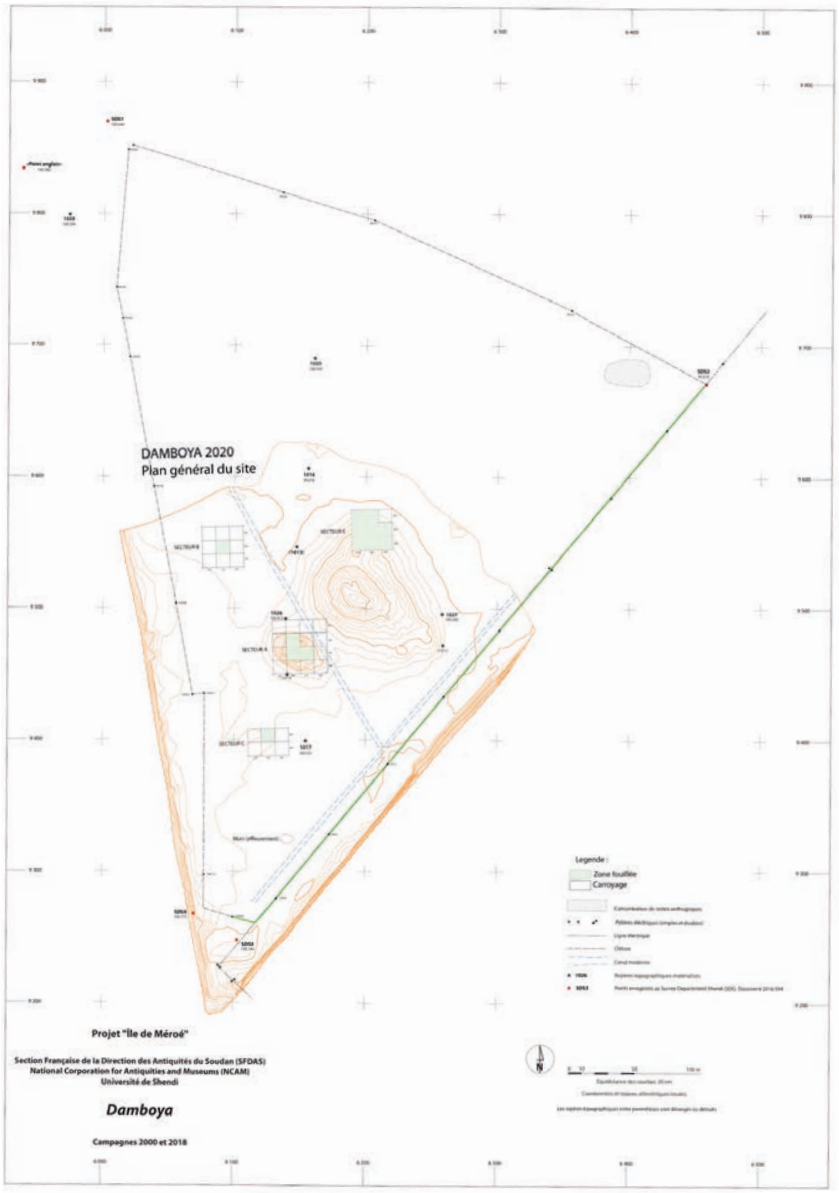

Figure 1. Map of Damboya and excavated areas (© SFDAS/musée du Louvre).

Introduction

The archaeological site of Damboya (Figure 1), identified by F. Hinkel and investigated in 2002 by Patrice Lenoble and Vincent Rondot (Lenoble and Rondot 2003), is located 270km north of Khartoum, near Shendi, in the el-Hassa concession (1.7km), of which it is a component. The Louvre Museum asked the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, Sudan (NCAM) to integrate this concession into the Department of Egyptian Antiquities in 2020. Marc Maillot, current director of the mission, had expressed the wish to undertake archaeological excavations in Damboya, as part of his programme as director of the SFDAS (French Archaeological Unit in Sudan). A scientific cooperation agreement has therefore been signed between the Louvre Museum and the SFDAS, so that the Damboya excavation can begin in 2020 under the aegis of the SFDAS.

Damboya's potential to provide information has been recognised for a long time (Rondot 2006). The results obtained following the magnetometric survey carried out in 2008 on the central part of the site were promising for an in-depth study of an urban settlement on the banks of the Nile in central Sudan, in connection with one of the major sites of the Meroitic period, el-Hassa (Rondot 2013). This partial survey covered an area of 2.35ha, itself divided into eight square modules of 50m on each side, a rectangle of 40mx50m and a square of 40m per side. It revealed two buildings. The first, located on the highest hill on the site, measured at least 80mx60m and seemed to have several internal subdivisions of important modules (from 10m a side minimum to 20m maximum). South of this central hill, a small 18x20m building was clearly visible. It also featured small modular internal partitions. Other magnetic anomalies were visible in the rest of the covered area, but were not rectilinear and might have been created by tracks.

These results enabled the SFDAS archaeological team to select the most promising sectors for a long-term study of the settlement of Damboya, after a final survey on site. The first campaign extended from February 1st, 2020 until March 6th 2020. The archaeological team was composed of the following members: Marc Maillot, director of the SFDAS, responsible for Sector A and director of the mission; Romain David, SFDAS researcher, ceramologist; Gabrielle Choimet, PhD student at Sorbonne Université, responsible for Sectors B, C, D, E; Matthias Biro, international

volunteer, SFDAS, topographer; Emma Maines, anthropologist, Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne and Musée de l'Homme, head of the Medieval necropolis; Giorgio Nogara, archaeologist, Lille 3 University and associate member of the SFDAS; Wafa Sharif Dawod Hussein, Nileein University student, ceramologist. The NCAM was represented by the Antiquities Inspector Al-Samani Ezaldeen Kara.

Five sectors were opened, three of which (B, C, D) showed only residual vestiges and virgin soil very close to the surface (see Choimet 2020, this issue). The two major sectors, A and E, on the other hand, are very rich and were chosen for their position framing the main hill of the site, itself far too extensive in terms of resources available to the SFDAS for its five-year programme. Sector A, which will be presented here, was mainly occupied by two Meroitic cultic structures, a temple and a chapel (Figure 2).

Sector A

The southern hill of Damboya has a diameter of 40m and a preserved elevation of 1.10m above surface level of the site. Covered with red brick fragments, small grindstones, ceramics and some scattered bones, it presents all aspects of the classical kom in central Sudan. Successive surveys carried out on the site indicated that the ceramics predominantly dated from the Meroitic period, which the results obtained this year confirm (1st–2nd century AD). A grid was put in place over the entire surface of the hill in order to spatialise the ceramics and determine the extent of the underlying structures. A grid of sixteen squares of 10x10m was therefore established, and the focus placed on three squares in the centre of the hill, where the remains were potentially the best preserved. After a significant surface clearance of mixed wind-blown sand and broken fired bricks, the first courses of the walls began to appear. The strategy established before the beginning of operations, namely to obtain the most complete plan possible of the preserved structures before opening sondages, was followed. A rectangular red brick building (14.2x7.2m) with a large central space (5x11m) was cleared, itself framed by structures (mostly of the Meroitic period) associated with it, or later. It also cut into prior structures that had relatively well-preserved plans in certain phases, indicating that a complete levelling of the sector before its foundation had not occured, as is often found on Meroitic urban sites where the reuse of space and building material is almost systemic. Five construction phases have been identified, mostly Meroitic in date, and three horizons are attested. These construction phases are described in detail below, from the most recent to the oldest.

The Medieval reoccupation of Sector A

A small square structure discovered in Square 270/510 was located east of the kom (orientated N-S), at the edge of the sondage. Entirely made of red brick fragments reused without interstitial mortar (thickness of the walls of a header brick i.e. 180mm), it undoubtedly corresponds to a fireplace, constructed with material from the demolition of the surrounding buildings, just as at el-Hassa in the Amun temple and its ceremonial palace (Rondot and Nogara 2019). Identified at el-Hassa as the occasional occupations of the Alodia period, we have a similar configuration here, but as the ceramic material is not in a closed context, this hypothesis cannot be confirmed. A later or even contemporary dating is quite possible.

Post-temple Meroitic occupation

This phase is identified by two very damaged, parallel mudbrick walls (F038 and 39, orientated SE-NW), (two bricks in stretchers or one header, 350mm), sealed by the Medieval construction mentioned above, and founded on the demolition of the Meroitic temple that constitutes the main occupation of the hill. These two walls, built in a header/stretcher pattern and located east of the kom in Square 270-510, include bricks of 350x180x80mm, the Meroitic standard, and bear traces of fire, some of the bricks being slightly vitrified and the mortar between the courses reduced to a very friable black powder in some spots. Poorly preserved, they were disturbed by successive *sebakhin* pits, which gradually cut all of the sector construction phases in order to recover brick and plaster.

A second group of three walls (F014, 15, 16; Figure 3) could also be part of this phase, the latter being located in Square 260-520 and directly below the surface level. In mudbrick 350mm wide, they are built in a header/stretcher pattern. Orientated respectively northwest-southeast (F014), with an adjoining northeast-southwest wall (F015) and a later addition orientated northeast-southwest (F016), they are connected to a whitewashed clay floor level (020) regularly

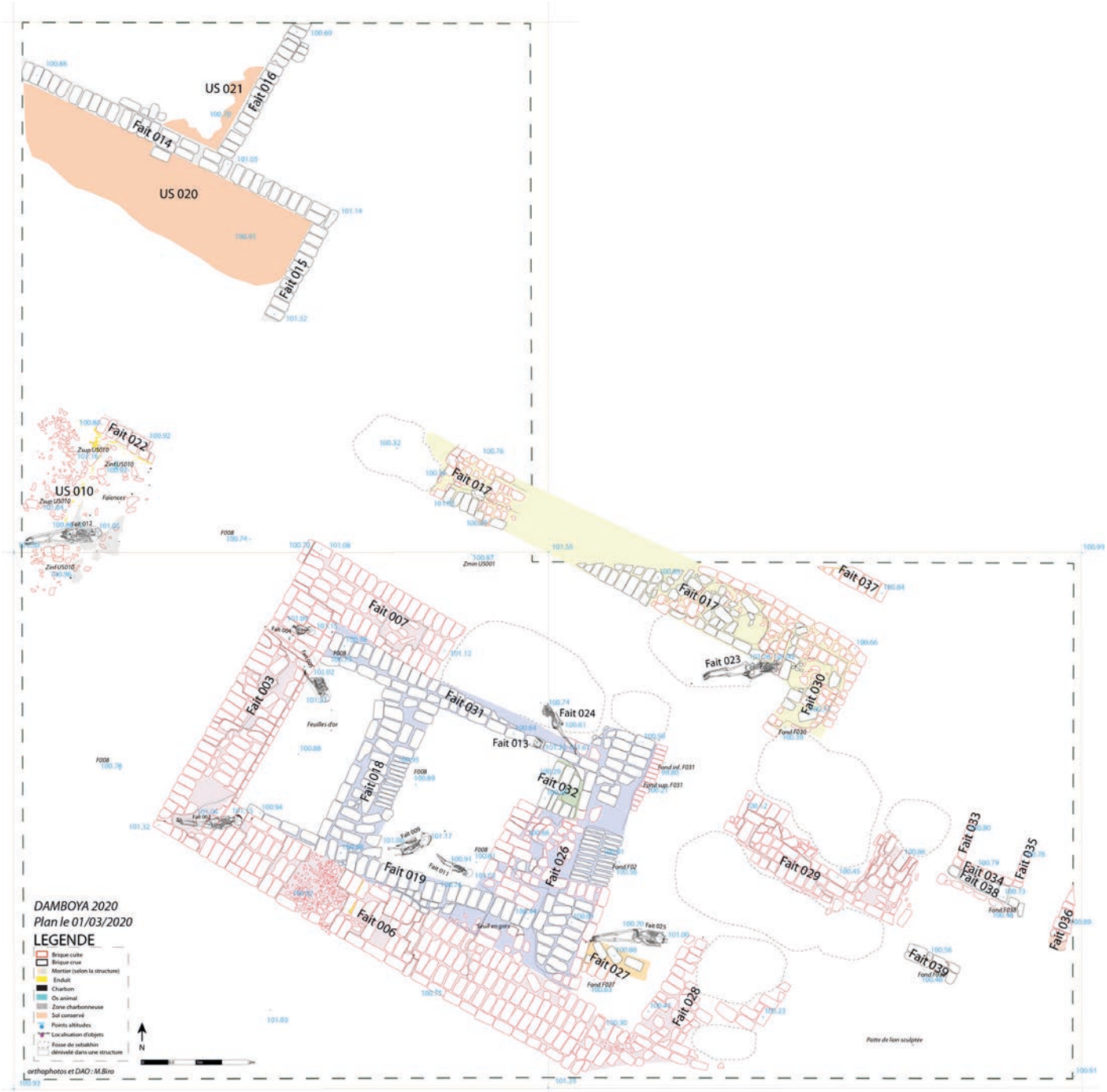

Figure 2. General plan of Sector A (© SFDAS/musée du Louvre).

maintained by spreading water to form successive screeds compacted by foot, as is usual in Meroitic settlements. This fairly high floor level (alt. 100.91m asl.) seals the demolition of the Meroitic temple and therefore appears to be of a later date. This statement is cautious, since no direct connection could be established between this group of walls and the ones of the temple, because of the damaged state of the remains in this sector. Such layouts were identified at el-Hassa in the Amun temple, where similar walls with buttresses of an additional mudbrick structure along the wall line were associated with the cult structure. Two of the three walls (F014 and F016) continue under the sondage sections, respectively to the NW and to the NE, which will make it possible to verify their chronology during future campaigns.

The Meroitic red brick temple

The best-preserved building in Sector A is a rectangular structure in red brick orientated SE-NW, measuring 14.20m long by 7.20m wide (Figure 4). Four walls (F003, 6, 7, 28) frame an internal space of 5x11m, of which nothing remains of the original circulation level. These four walls are 1.10m wide, with a header/stretcher pattern. Many bricks in the masonry are slightly vitrified. Additionally, there are bricks bearing plaster facing placed inwards, which indicates reuse of an earlier structure. Wall F006 widens towards the SE, up to 1.30m wide, because it cuts an older mudbrick

structure (cf. *infra*) but uses it partially as a foundation (F026), for masonry in a herringbone pattern and a blocking of broken red bricks at the junction between the temple and this older building (Figure 5). It then forms an angle with Wall F28 that is wider than the other walls (2m), probably to constitute the temple facade.

This F028 wall is particularly interesting even if poorly preserved (sometimes only one brick remains in the elevated wall), because it could correspond to the foundation of the southern half of a pylon. In fact, Wall F029, also very damaged by *sebakhin* pits, was potentially linked with F028 to form only one foundation wall for a temple pylon, even if the connection is today missing. This F029 wall, 1.20m wide, no longer has internal or external facing and is founded on the original matrix of the sector in hard yellow sand, free of any material. A pit full of demolished red brick – also cut in the original matrix of the sector – is visible and aligned with the northeast extension of Walls F028 and F029, which could indicate, in negative, the location of a northern pylon foundation, now missing. The hypothesis is uncertain however, because a similar foundation pit is not visible in a section to the south of Wall F028, which would imply that the facade of the temple was simply at right angles, just like the first temple of Naqa at the foot of the eponymous *jebel*. If this were the case, the additional metre in length from Wall F029 remains unexplained, and would form a sort of extension towards the east in the central axis of the facade, joining in the foundation with the latter (Figure 6).

The central space of the building was probably coated with white plaster on raw earth with black sickle patterns, unspecified floral motifs with yellow, red, and blue pigments and a total absence of green, as in Muweis or Jebel Barkal (Letourneux and Feneuille 2010). We were able to collect in the surface material, unfortunately not *in situ* but inside the central space, a small number of these plaster fragments on raw earth. The internal facing of Wall F003 bore, just above its foundation projection (alt. 101.15m asl.), the negative of these plasters. However, this was not the case for Walls F006 and F007, which does not seem unusual in view of the position of Wall F003 in the main axis of the temple.

On the other side of Wall F003 towards the west and at the limit of Square 260/510, a very circumscribed destruction level comprising a large number of lime plaster fragments (179), a concentration of gold leaf, faience and fragments of boxes in glazed ceramic tiles correspond to the demolition of Wall F003. This context (US010) is remarkable beyond this particular concentration of material, because it includes a large amount of charcoal sealed by a destruction layer, fragments of vitrified brick, and layers of uniformly burnt silt. Everything suggests that a fire partially damaged the temple just west of its external facing, where the majority of the preserved decoration was found. A sample of the charcoal was taken for C^{14} analysis, which we hope is viable in order to obtain an absolute dating of this first destruction of the temple, all the more crucial since information derived from the ceramic material presently comes from only a very few closed contexts.

We are considering the possibility of a second level of destruction of the temple, due to two walls, F022 and F017, which share the same orientation as the temple and its walls F003, F006, F007, but are not contemporary in construction. F022 has slightly burnt bricks in its masonry, and cuts US010 in a straight line, disturbing this context to found the wall. We will however have to check this hypothesis next year, which will involve a complete dismantling of this destruction level, because a line of white plaster on lime mortar is attached to the foundation trench of Wall F022 and abuts its exterior facing.

Wall F017 (northwest-southeast; 1.20m wide), meanwhile, follows the same orientation as Wall F007 and is separated from it by a passage 1.30m wide, forming a sort of corridor around the exterior walls of the temple. This wall, arranged in fragments of red and mudbricks (some of which are completely vitrified), is deeply founded (alt. 100.32m asl.). A floor of hardened whitewashed clay remains connected to its internal facing (alt. 100.89m asl.) and seals the first level of demolition (alt. 100.87m asl.) belonging to F007 (the destruction of Wall F017 covers the foundation trench of F007). F017 was therefore built later in the construction phases of the main building formed by Walls F003, F006 and F007, but considering its orientation, it is contemporary with the use of the temple itself. The hypothesis is confirmed with its shear Wall F030 (N-S, 1.20m wide). This wall is aligned with F028, and forms another side of the temple, located to the northeast. F030 also seems to have been modified after the erection of F017, because it was founded at a higher altitude (alt. 100.39m asl.) and simply placed on the original matrix of the sector, i.e. a level of compacted yellow sand. In addition, the external facing of the wall, made of fired brick, is not entirely straight and laid with fragments, contrasting with the very regular masonry of Walls F003, F006 and F007.

Figure 3. Walls DAM20-A-F014, F015, F016 and F020 (© SFDAS/musée du Louvre).

Figure 4. Square 260-510 from the northeast (© SFDAS/musée du Louvre).

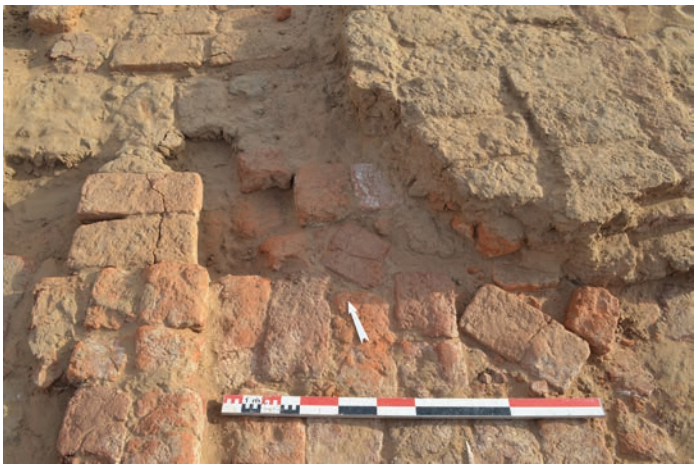

Figure 5. Wall DAM20-A-F006 and foundation AF026 (© SFDAS/musée du Louvre).

Figure 6. Walls DAM20-A-F029 (foreground) and AF028 (background) (© SFDAS/musée du Louvre).

Wall F017 is believed to have originally extended towards the northwest in a straight line, but this is now unverifiable as it is cut by a *sebakhin* pit down to its foundations in Square 260/520. The possible connection with Walls F014, 15 and 16 is therefore lost, if it ever existed. However, it is possible that F017 formed a right angle with another wall currently missing and orientated south to north, so as to frame the entire temple and more particularly Walls F007 and F003. The location of F022 is therefore suspect, as it is well positioned to fulfill this role, both in plan and in the construction phase. The corridor surrounding the temple would therefore be symmetrical to the south, and demolition alignments still in place south of Wall F006 at the end of the 2020 campaign suggest that the hypothesis could be confirmed next year.

The framing walls of the redbrick temple all cut a circulation floor level made of hard clay (foundation trench of 100-150mm wide). Wall F003 is an excellent example, as can be seen on its west facing. As such, it is interesting to note the presence of an exterior foundation foot of two fired bricks at the junction of F003 and F007. Relatively high in altitude (alt. 100.70m asl.), it could correspond to the departure of a vertical torus, so as to form an engaged column at the outer northwest corner of the temple. This foot also cuts more broadly into a relatively well-preserved floor level, which indicates significant previous occupations.

The mudbrick chapel

This previous earlier occupation is confirmed by the presence of three mud brick walls, F018, F019 and F031 (the latter, orientated NW-SE, was initially faced with mud brick stretchers and measured 1.10m wide), which form a rectangular space (4m wide, open on one side) unfortunately cut to the west by Wall F003 (Figure 7). A second rectangular space of identical width is bounded on the east by the same walls, in addition to Wall F026. The latter, a composite, has been destroyed and partially reused during the construction of the red brick temple. It has an exterior facing in

red brick and internal masonry of mud brick, to which is attached to the north a section of wall made of mud bricks placed on edge and founded on sand, much higher than the rest of the wall (alt. 100.56m and 100.21m asl. for the rest of the wall). The red brick fragments, like the herringbone pattern and the heavy mortar (*mouna*) joints observable in connection with Wall F006, correspond to the reuse of Wall F026 in the red brick temple, so as to maintain stable foundations.

The angle formed by Walls F026 and F031 is the key to understanding this strange arrangement. Indeed, deeply founded (alt. 99.80m asl.) with a course of red bricks on edge (Figure 8), this angle corresponds to the northern half of a pylon, and its symmetrical south pendant is bonded to the bricks on edge, which certainly served as a support for a rectangular threshold in sandstone of similar dimensions (800x600mm). The discovery of a sandstone threshold on the surface level corroborates this hypothesis, even if it may belong to a later occupation phase. We therefore have a double-room mud brick chapel (4x10m for the internal space, the external space is cut on all sides) with a pylon made of mud bricks faced with red bricks and an access from east to west thanks to a threshold right on the axis of the chapel. This axis is confirmed by the bricks on edge appearing within Wall F018, exactly in the same alignment with the first threshold, opening onto the second chamber of the chapel.

The location of the main entrance to the east is also confirmed by the presence of the shear Wall of F026, F027, not joined to it, but abutting and bonded to it, with a large amount of mortar. Faced with red brick and built with mudbrick (laid in a herringbone pattern), it is cut to the east by the facade of the later red brick temple, F028. This type of wall is characteristic of the entrance staircases, similar to those discovered at el-Hassa in the cult complex. F027 probably constitutes one of the framing walls of a staircase leading to the threshold located in the centre of the chapel pylon mentioned above. It must have had its northern counterpart, now missing. The foundation of F027 is also higher than that of the southern half (alt. 100.63m asl.), which indicates that this staircase was erected after the pylon. To conclude, the exterior facings of the chapel had to be coated with lime plaster, as shown by some bricks in the masonry.

The occupation before the chapel

Considering the general state of the sector, the area had been used as a quarry for materials, probably right after the abandonment of the area and had been greatly disturbed by numerous *sebakhin* pits. It is paradoxically thanks to this poor state of preservation that we have been able to observe evidence of the first occupation of the sector, provided that the level of virgin sand at which we stopped is the original matrix (the Neolithic horizon was uniformly present throughout the cult complex at el-Hassa (Rondot and Nogara pers. comm.); it does not seem to be present in Damboya, at least in the excavated areas).

This previous occupation is limited to a 500x700mm wall, F032, running roughly east-west and entirely built in mud brick. It continues under the northern half of the chapel pylon towards the east, and served as a support for Wall F031 during the construction of the mudbrick chapel. An empty space the size of one brick was left in the centre of the wall and filled with a sandy-ash matrix without any sherds. It is remarkable because it was deliberately created, and not the result of any disturbance. The anteriority of this wall is confirmed by its orientation, slightly different, and by the first foundation course in fired brick of F031 (pylon excepted), which is located at the same level as the top of F032 (alt. 100.45m asl.). It was also preserved during the foundation of the red brick temple, since the red brick part of F026 leans against F032. The whole is then cut by two very deep sebakhin pits (alt. 100.29m asl.), the semi-circular hoe traces of which are still visible. Finally, the module of brick size used in F032, 350x180x80 mm, argues in favour of a Meroitic date.

Conclusion

Sector A chronology

As indicated in the introductory remarks, Sector A underwent five construction phases and three chronological horizons. The five construction phases, described above, mainly date to the classical Meroitic period and no Neolithic horizon, while expected, has been discovered. An additional phase of occupation of the mound is to be mentioned, in addition to the Meroitic period and the occasional Medieval re-occupation. After the abandonment of the temple the

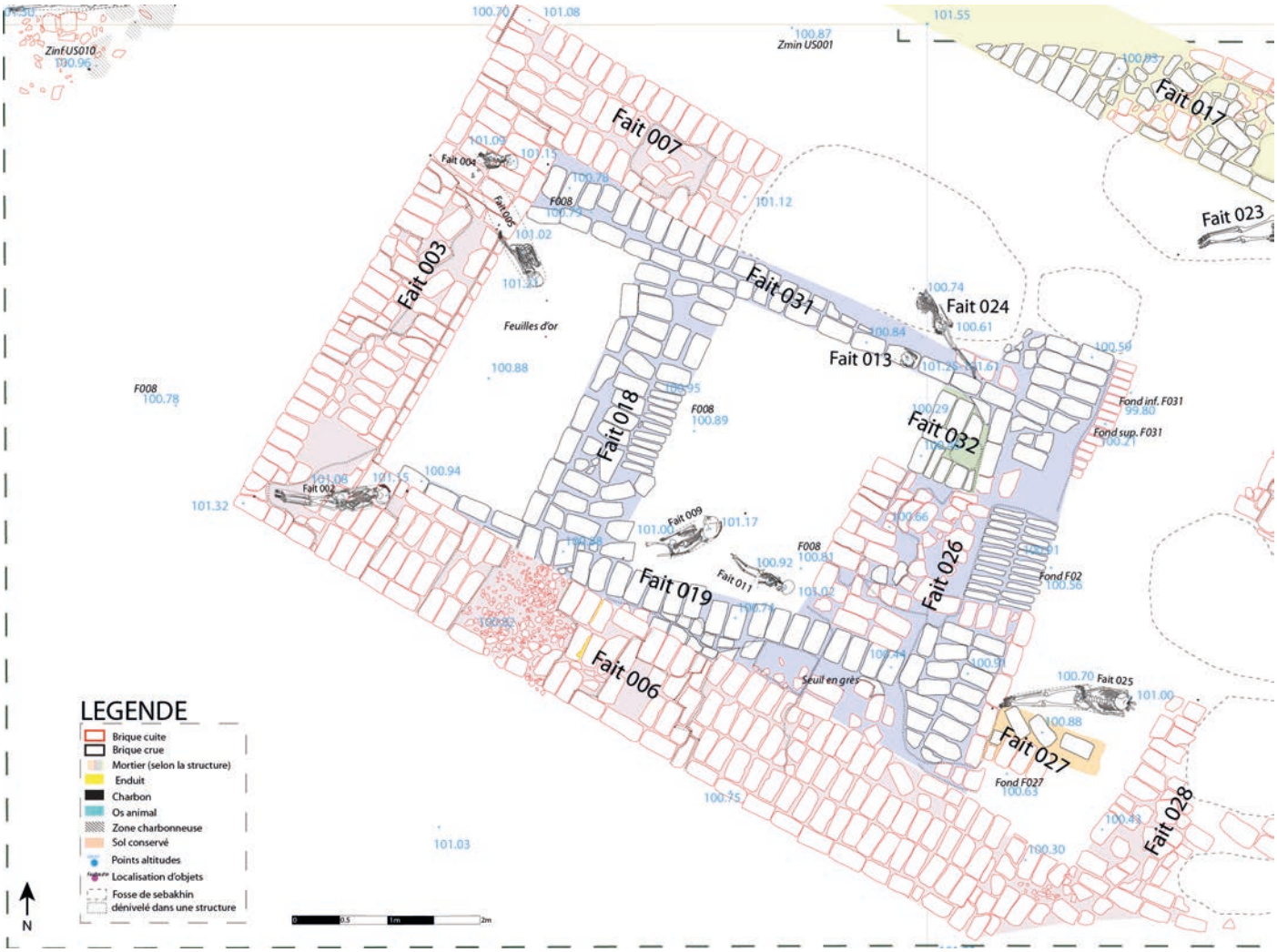

Figure 7. Plan of the mudbrick chapel (© SFDAS/musée du Louvre).

kom was reused as a Medieval and largely Christian necropolis.

Like in Muweis or Abu Erteila, burial practice was opportunistic, along or inside the walls, mainly in the area of the red brick temple. A total of ten burials were excavated, nine corresponding to primary deposits and one to a secondary deposit. In addition, there are eight other human bone concentration points, including one grave clearly identified in another sector of Damboya. The graves are almost without material, and the pits are very narrow and closely approximate the size of the deceased. In most cases, a double shroud wraps the body, first a thick brown cloth knotted with a herringbone pattern covering the whole of the deceased, and a second tied to the body with a fine black square pattern, exactly as in Muweis (Ardagna and Maillot 2017). The deceased are orientated east-west, with the head to the east. The C^{14} analyses carried out in Muweis on Christian inhumations, with identical burial practices, indicate a date in the 13th century AD. We will confirm this by additional analyses in future campaigns.

Small finds

Among the objects found in Sector A, there are several faience beads to be noted, mostly circular and of small diameter, from necklaces or bracelets. Fragments of *tesserae* made of glass or faience are also well represented, some still bearing traces of mortar on the back, confirming their function as wall inlays. The wall decoration of the area, probably coming from the central space of the red brick temple (F003) is rich and varied, with fragments of painted plaster, gilded with gold leaf, or sculpted. Iron inlays are also notable, such as a full Isis knot.

These finds clearly indicate a ceremonial context. Two fragments of terracotta offering tables, similar to those discovered in temple contexts such as el-Hassa (Rondot 2010), are worthy of mention. The first is decorated with an *ankh* sign and the other with characteristic droplets at the corners. Two fragments of yellow sandstone, plaster-coated and painted, could also be part of the architectural decor or of a statuary element, perhaps a base. Their preservation unfortunately is very poor, and assigning them a definitive function remains risky. Statuary is present,

Figure 8. Walls F031 and F026, (DAM20-A-F031+AF026) (© SFDAS/musée du Louvre).

Figure 9. Paw of reclining feline, DAM20-A-001-048 (© SFDAS/musée du Louvre).

Figure 10. Box fragment with Isis knots, DAM20-A-010-005 (© SFDAS/musée du Louvre).

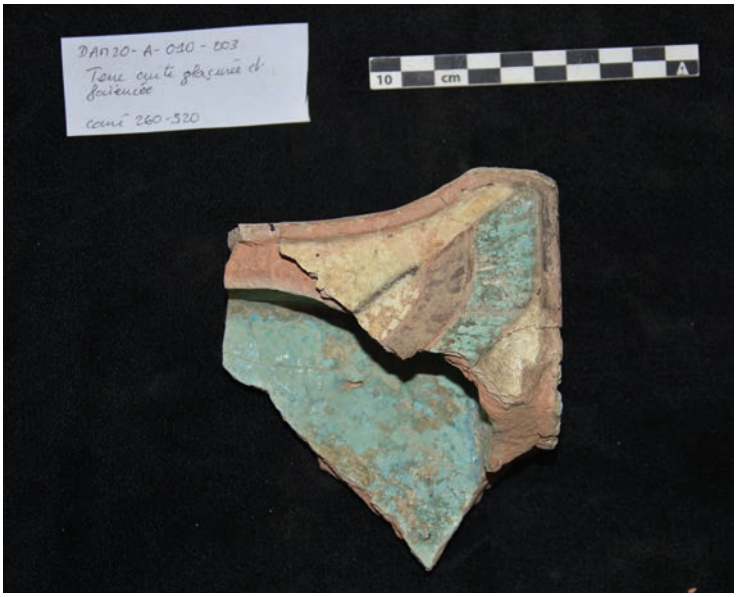

Figure 11. Box fragment with Isis knots and wings, DAM20-A-010-003 (© SFDAS/musée du Louvre).

Figure 12. Sketch of an offering scene, DAM20-A-010-006 (© SFDAS/musée du Louvre).

as is proven by the base of a reclining feline (lion?) statue in ferruginous sandstone; however, the motif is no longer identifiable except by the right front paw (Figure 9).

Faience constitutes the most notable material of this first campaign at Damboya, and in particular within the destruction layer US010, the first collapse of the red brick temple. This context delivered fragments of two boxes of glazed ceramic tiles. The first is decorated with Isis knots distributed in different registers and framed with wine leaf patterns. Note the part of the box with a curved shape, thus revealing the possibility of an additional element to close the box which has now disappeared, or perhaps more simply the start of a corner (Figure 10). Indeed, the second box, rectangular in shape, also has a curve at one of its angles, and has Isis or falcon wings opened in protection on its faces, arranged in multiple registers with fine work in colour and decorative patterns. The sides are decorated with Isis knots, alternately white and blue. The inside of the box is also glazed (Figure 11).

Another remarkable faience element is represented by several fragments of glazed ceramic tiles still bearing traces of mortar on their reverse and therefore intended as inlays. These fragments represent a ram lying (with a bifid hoof), whose coat was difficult to identify at first but which clearly develops in scales and not in curls, like the rams flanking the *dromos* of el-Hassa (Rondot and Claustre 2018). To our knowledge, no faience representation of rams with scales has been found so far. Another faience fragment is worth mentioning: it depicts a body wrapped in a shroud (Osiris?) and could possibly be joined with another fragment representing a head, but a missing intermediate piece is required to confirm this.

To conclude, a fragment of reused sandstone, bearing traces of yellow pigment, bears a beautiful sketch. On the obverse is an offering scene to the enthroned king drawn with charcoal, depicting a divinity before the king and an indeterminate deity behind him (Figure 12). On the reverse, the ochre contours of a schematic seated figure are clearly visible.

References

Ardagna, Y. and M. Maillot 2017. 'The Medieval Necropolis of Mouweis (Shendi Area, Sudan): Bioarchaeological Insights ', *The 81st Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, Vancouver, British Columbia.* Vancouver, Canada, unpublished.

Lenoble, P. and V. Rondot 2003. 'À la redécouverte d'el-Hassa. Temple à Amon, palais royal et ville de l'empire méroïtique', *Cahiers de Recherche de l'Institut de Papyrologie et d'Égyptologie de Lille* 23, 101-115.

Letourneux, J-P. and S. Feneuille 2010. 'Chemical and physical analyses of facing mortars collected from various Meroitic sites', in W. Godlewski and A. Łajtar (eds), *Between the Cataracts*, *Proceedings of the 11th International Conference on Meroitic Studies. PAM supplement series 2.2.* Warsaw, 577-582.

Rondot, V. 2006. ' Le qore Amanakhareqerem et son temple à Amon d'el-Hassa ', in V. Rondot and N. Dextreit (eds), *Kerma et Méroé. Cinq conferences d'archéologie soudanaise*. Khartoum, 41-47.

Rondot, V. 2010. 'Le matériel cultuel du temple à Amon d'el-Hassa', in M. Baud (ed.), *Méroé, un empire sur le Nil*. Paris, 236-239.

Rondot, V. 2013. 'El-Hassa: un temple à Amon dans l'île de Méroé au Ier siècle de notreère', *Comptes-rendus de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres* 2012 (I), 167-182.

Rondot, V. and D. Claustre. 2018. 'Nos premières sources sur le bélier de Soba REM 0001 : le Bourguignon Pierre Trémaux, Johannes Dümichen et le Vénitien Giovanni Miani', in M. Honegger (ed.), *Nubian Archaeology in the XXIst Century. Proceedings of the Thirteenth International Conference for Nubian Studies, Neuchatel, 1st-6th September 2014*. Leuven-Paris-Bristol, 457-472.

Rondot, V. and G. Nogara 2019. 'El-Hassa 2018 : en 100 apr. J.-C., un nouveau temple à Amon dans l'île de Méroé. Les acquis et les questions', *Bulletin de la Société française d'Égyptologie* 201, 79-103.