

# Cairns and below: the el-Ga'ab Depression, Western Dongola Reach

Yahia Fadl Tahir

## Introduction

A large number of stone structures or cairns were registered during the seven seasons of archaeological survey (2009–2018) in the el-Ga'ab Depression by the Archaeological, Ethnographical, and Environmental Survey Project. Around 138 sites with stone cairns were reported in the el-Ga'ab Depression, sometimes as solitary features and sometimes clustered together (Tahir 2009, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). In Sudan, the custom of stone cairn burials is well known from the prehistoric period up to more recent times. Bonnet (1992, 621) mentioned that during the Early Kerma period (2500-2050 BC), burials were marked by a low, circular superstructure of sandstone slabs, stuck in the ground in concentric circles. This custom is seen in other parts of East Africa; for example, the presence of stone cairns was mentioned earlier by Parkinson (1935) in northern Kenya.

We classified the cairns reported in the study area, according to the morphological classification of East African cairns by scholars such as Sutton (1973) and Davies (2013). It is as follows:

**Simple:** Roughly circular piles of stone without external elaboration (Sutton 1973).

**Kerbed:** Similar to Simple, but the defining characteristic of kerbed cairns is the intentional construction of a ring to support the body of the cairn (Posnansky 1968).

**Elongated ring:** Piles of stones that have various elongated, linear and complete or partially complete ring forms (Davies 2013, 228).

**Rectilinear:** Roughly rectangular or square cairns (Davies 2013, 230).

**Faced:** Large loose piles of small stones and rubble faced by a neat stone revetment in several courses so as to contain or encase the loose core (Robertshaw 1986).

**Platform:** Filled and raised platforms, ring and rectilinear faced (Davies 2012; Clack and Brittain 2010, 68).

**Ring:** Rings of stones, perhaps the most elaborate of the various cairn types (Soper and Lynch 1977; Welsby 2007).

**Cairns with monolith(s):** Cairns with monoliths positioned upright (Lane *et al.* 2007).

## Cairns in the el-Ga'ab Depression

In the el-Ga'ab Depression, all of the cairn types discovered resembled those found elsewhere in East Africa as mentioned above. They were categorised into the ring, elongated ring, simple, kerbed, simple with megalithic, rectilinear, platform and faced cairn types (Figure 1). In addition, two new types were noted that differed in construction, and were classified as follows:

	Type	No.	%
1	Ring cairn	81	51.6
2	Simple cairn	39	24.8
3	Crescent cairn	16	10.2
4	Kerbed cairn	5	3.2
5	Elongated ring cairn	4	2.6
6	Simple cairn with megalith	3	1.9
7	Crescent cairn with megalith	3	1.9
8	Rectilinear cairn	3	1.9
9	Platform cairn	2	1.3

Figure 1. Cairn type percentages in el-Ga'ab Depression.

**Crescent:** Stones were stacked in a crescent shape with a diameter of 1-3m and height of 0.50m. These were always located on slopes of mountains.

**Crescent with megalithic cairns:** Stones stacked in a crescent shape but provided with one or more standing stone slabs.

The northern and the central parts in the el-Ga'ab Depression were selected and test excavations conducted on 10 sites with rock cairns. These had been registered during the survey with a brief description based upon the appearance of the stone structures, yet their contents, where present, were ambiguous. This caused some confusion concerning their classification and cultural phase. Accordingly, it was necessary to conduct excavations of selected

examples of cairns to reveal their contents. The two most common types, ring and simple cairns, were chosen for excavation. In addition, a kerbed cairn was excavated.

## The excavations

### Ring cairn

#### Site: KO-04-002

This site is located to the west of the Ga'ab el-Lagia village on a Nubian sandstone plateau. A number of circular stone structures with diameters ranging from 1.40m to 3m were present. Two cairns were chosen for excavation. At a depth of 300mm, virgin soil and the rock base were reached. The first cairn was 3m and the second 1.5m in diameter. The second yielded five wavy-line decorated Mesolithic pottery sherds.

#### Site: AN-04-020

AN-04-020 is located west of the Dongola-Argin road, and to the east of Ga'ab Abu Namil. The site is comprised of a number of stone piles. Two adjacent cairns were chosen for test excavation, the first with an oval shape and dimensions of 2.30m x 3.90m. The rock base layer was reached at a depth of 400mm. There was a pit (about 300mm in width, 200mm depth) that was cleaned and no archaeological remains were found (Figures 2 and 3). The second was a simple cairn and will be discussed below.

#### Site: MNG-05-011

This site is located in Ga'ab el-Mangoor on an edge of a valley. Two structures with diameters of 2m were selected for excavation. Virgin soil was reached at a depth of 200mm. A small pit was found in the centre of both cairns. No archaeological material was recovered from one of the pits, while the other contained part of a Mesolithic pot base (Figures 4 and 5) and charcoal.

#### Site: SAR-05-008

This site is located to the south of the Kwais hills on a plateau. Two cairns, each of 7m diameter, were chosen. The excavation depth was 500mm and 200mm respectively. No archaeological remains were found (Figures 6 and 7).

### Simple cairn

#### Site: KO-001-04

This site is located on the western edge of the paleo-channel on a plateau, to the west of the Kogil hamlet. It has been subjected to natural and artificial erosion, and as a result human skeletal remains were exposed and scattered on the surface. Consequently, a salvage excavation was carried out here. Excavation was conducted to a depth of 300mm, which revealed two human skeletons. A few pelvic bones remained from the first individual, in addition to some sections of a femur and a humerus. The burial position could not be precisely determined due to disturbance, but it may have been east-west. Part of the skull, some vertebrae, the radius, ulna, and parts of the pelvis remained in the grave of the second individual. They were orientated north-west with the head directed to the north. No grave goods were found. One Neolithic pottery sherd was recovered, but it may have been introduced from the surface as the burial was not intact (Figures 8 and 9).

#### Site: HA-1-10

The site is located in the western edge of Wadi Hashsha, on a hill edge. The cairn's diameter was 4m. In the centre at a depth of 300mm, in an oval shaped pit (350x350mm, 200mm depth), a grinding stone, animal bones, a shell, and sherds of dotted-line and wavy-line decorated Mesolithic pottery were recovered (Figures 10 and 11).

#### Site: AN-3-1

The site is located to the south of Ga'ab Abu Namil. There are seven rock cairns with diameters ranging between 3-5m. The superstructures resemble those found in Kerma period cemeteries (2500-1500 BC). A number of stone tools were collected from the vicinity of the cairns. On conducting excavation, virgin soil was reached at a depth of 100mm and 200mm in the two cairns chosen. There was no archaeological material obtained.

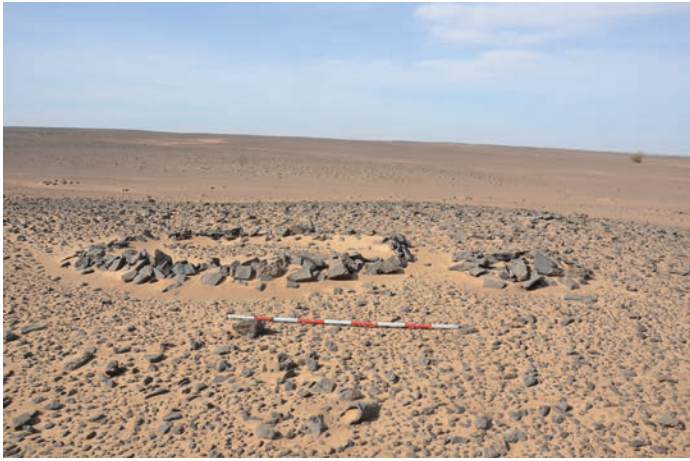


Figure 2. Excavated cairn body at Site AN-04-020, facing east.

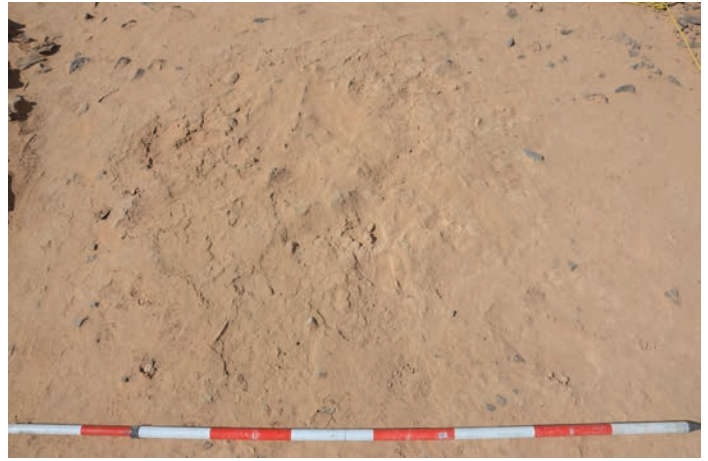


Figure 3. Cleaned cairn at Site AN-04-020, facing east.



Figure 4. The cairn at Site MNG-05-011, facing east.

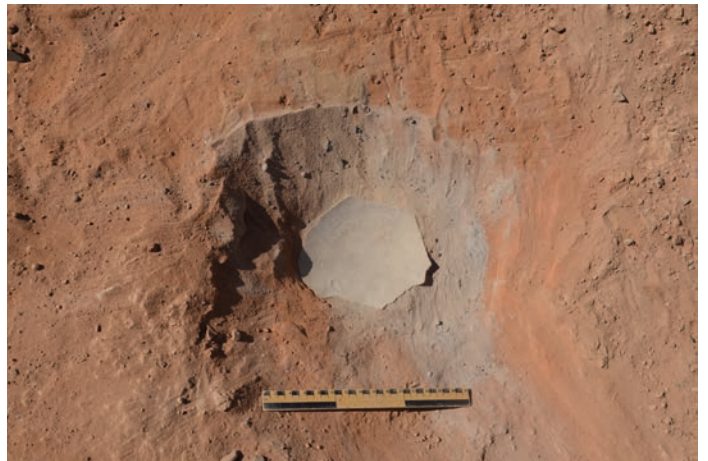


Figure 5. The pit of the cairn at Site MNG-05-011 with a pot base.



Figure 6. The cairn at Site SAR-05-008, facing east.

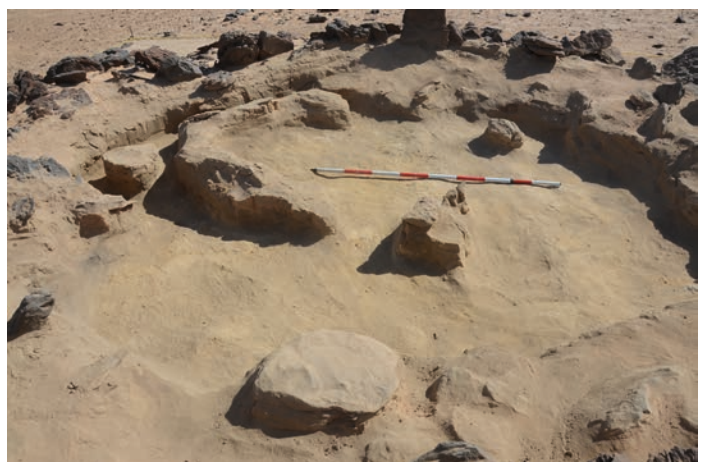


Figure 7. The cairn at Site SAR-05-008, post excavation, facing west.

Site: AN-04-15

AN-04-15 was located in the north-eastern of the Abu Namil village and was a rocky mound 2.5m in diameter. The first 100mm layer was removed and virgin soil was reached. There was no archaeological material recovered.

Site: AN-04-020

A small simple cairn (1.5mx1.3m) was excavated to a depth of 400mm where bare rock appeared. No archaeological material was found (Figure 3).

Site: UH-05-012

This site is located on the edge of the Dongola-Ga'ab Um Hilal Road. The site is composed of two Nubian stone cairns. The western structure, with diameter of 3.7m, was chosen for excavation. After 100mm the rock base appeared. A large piece of sandstone was situated in the centre of the cairn. A few undated pottery sherds were recovered (Figures 12 and 13).

**Kerbed cairn**Site: SAR-05-008

A kerbed cairn, with a diameter of 2.9m, was chosen for excavation. Virgin soil was reached at a depth of 200mm, and no archaeological material was found (Figures 14 and 15).

**Discussion**

Most of the areas in the el-Ga'ab Depression with stone cairns are not populated at present, so the study was unable to obtain ethnographic data. Even in inhabited areas, the local population had little or no information regarding the structures. One of the reasons contributing to this may be that the Kababish inhabitants of the el-Ga'ab migrated to the area from Northern Kordofan at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One informant told us that stone piles with standing stones are used as blinds by local hunters during gazelle hunts, wherein the hunter conceals themselves behind them.

It is clear from the excavated Simple Cairns in the el-Ga'ab Depression that the vast majority excavated were not burials. Only one contained a human skeleton, probably dating to the Neolithic period. Brown (1966, 60-62) excavated similar cairns in Kenya's Central Rift Valley and found human burials with stone tools related to the Neolithic culture. The absence of human burials in the vast majority of cairns in el-Ga'ab leads us to be cautious when identifying other stone piles as graves in Sudan. Kerma ring stone tombs and C-group stone burials, for example, are both examples of typical cairn superstructure forms that may be misleading in many instances, particularly if there is no other supporting evidence for a stone cairn's identification. Because the use of piles of stones as a grave superstructure was adopted in Sudan early in prehistory, simple stone cairns have typically been classified as burials.

The main question now is what were the functions of such non-burial cairns? The results obtained in el-Ga'ab may open an avenue for investigation and for a continuation of the discussion. Davies (2013, 236) paid attention to the absence of burials in many cairns, finding them interesting features. He raised questions concerning the relationship between physical burial and memorial. He added that attention might be usefully directed northwards into South Sudan and the Nile Valley, where numerous, apparently similar, features are better understood (Davies 2013, 236).

Some possible suggestions can be drawn from the archaeological finds in some cairns from the el-Ga'ab Depression. Although most of the cairns have not exposed their secrets, the most interesting were the cairns that provided a few Mesolithic pottery sherds and other materials recovered from Sites MNG-05-011, HA-1-10 and KO-002-04, which tentatively suggest that these cairns may have been constructed by Mesolithic people. In Site HA-1-10, the pit contained a grinding stone, animal bone remains, a shell and Mesolithic pottery sherds, which may be related to rituals related to a subsistence economy. The finds represent animals (terrestrial and aquatic), and grinding tools. The grinding stone and pot may be representative of tools and techniques. Mesolithic peoples may have sought blessings by performing certain rituals at these cairns, knowing that these sites were located near palaeochannels and near many Neolithic and Mesolithic sites.

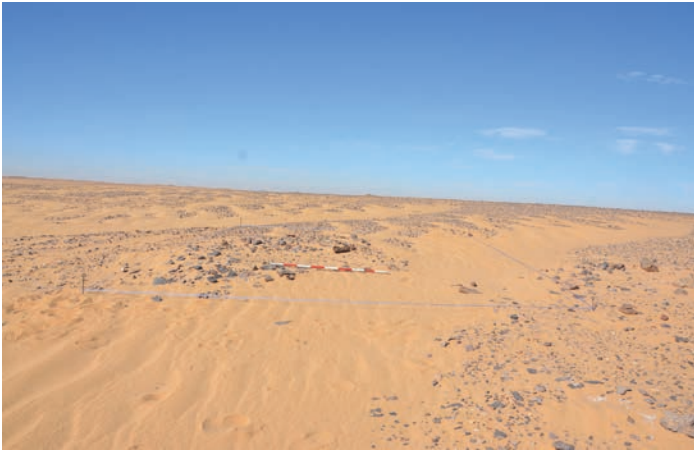


Figure 8. General view of the cairn at Site KO-001-04, facing west.

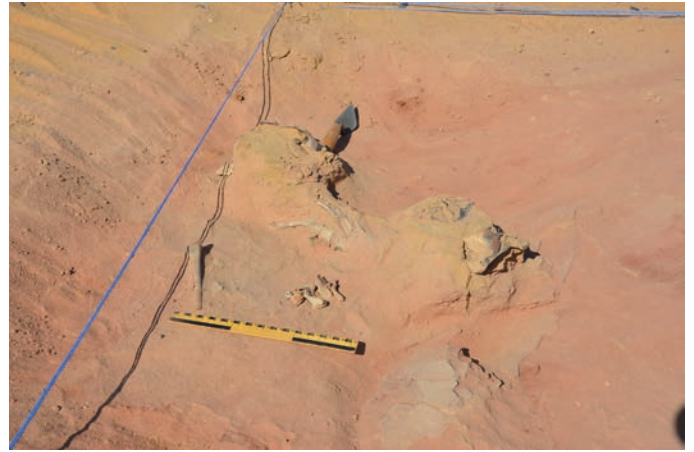


Figure 9. The second skeleton recovered from the cairn at Site KO-001-04.



Figure 10. The cairn at Site HA-1-10, facing west.



Figure 11. *In situ* archaeological material inside the cairn pit at Site HA-1-10.



Figure 12. The cairn at Site UH-05-12, facing east.



Figure 13. A large sandstone slab capping the cairn at Site UH-05-12, facing east.



Figure 14. The kerbed cairn at Site SAR-05-008, facing west.

Figure 15. The kerbed cairn at Site SAR-05-008, facing east.

Posnansky (1968) excavated five cairns near Olorgesailie (Kenya) and none provided clear evidence of actual burials. Fragmentary remains of domestic cattle and caprines in the matrix of one demonstrated that some of the cairn builders had domestic livestock, but no other artefacts were found. Sutton (1973) excavated circular piles across western Kenya. Most were roughly undifferentiated stones concealing a shallow central burial pits, or were hollows covered by a few larger capstones. His excavations of two cairns at Kapkures yielded blades of Elmenteitan type, pottery sherds, and fragments of cattle bone, but no human remains. The excavation of another cairn at Chemartin revealed a rough kerb on one side and two obsidian blades of Elmenteitan type, but again no human remains.

Five cairns, ring (AN-04-020, SAR-05-008), simple (AN-3-1, AN-04-15) and kerbed (SAR-05-008) did not reveal any archaeological materials or signs of digging, so their interpretation becomes difficult and requires more archaeological work and cross-comparative studies. However, this study supports the theory of diverse commemorative practice as suggested by many authors. A number of faced cairns have been excavated by Sassoon (1966) and Robertshaw (1986) and none contained burials of any kind. Lane *et al.* (2007) reported a total absence of human remains within many cairns previously regarded as possible burial markers in Engaruka in northern Tanzania.

In contrast, many authors found artefacts without burials; Sassoon (1966, 92-93) excavated two small cairns in Engaruka (Tanzania) to a depth of 700mm, and found a few sherds, charcoal, and no burials, as did Robertshaw (1986) in the same area. Stiles and Munro-Hay (1981) excavated circular mounds, squarish platforms and ring cairns at Kokurmatakore (Kenya) and found wood powder, dating to between 500-1100 years old. Platforms cairns in Southern Ethiopia were excavated by Clack and Brittain (2010, 67) who identified the remains of burnt animal bone and microlithic flakes, and the presence of both a small central and small external hollow, that the investigators speculated may have contained standing stone stelae. They view these arrangements as some form of ritual surface, on which various activities, potentially slaughter/sacrifice, were conducted. Can this be hypothesised as a phenomenon at el-Ga'ab? These features are similar to those found in the el-Ga'ab Depression ring cairns (KO-002-04, AN-04-020, MNG-05-011) and simple cairns (HA-1-10, UH-05-012) from which were recovered sherds, bone fragments and snails. Four cairns revealed an intentional pit in the centre. Equally, however, two contained archaeological material and two lacked artefacts. The empty pits, were they for the installation of a standing stone or wood feature in the past?

Connerton (1989) stated that cairns might indicate or mark public spaces wherein acts of performance and socialisation (including dance, song, ritual and ceremony) were conducted, acts embodied in memory-making. In cases where no human skeleton was discovered in the cairn, the cairn may simply be symbolic of burial or an active memorialisation. Sutton (1973) and Posnansky (1968, 187) considered the cairns as cenotaphs. The Maasai, for example, and related groups rarely inter their dead in cairns today, however, oral histories recount older traditions of cairn interments for persons of status, particularly seers or laibon. Posnansky (1968, 183) suggests that many cairns may actually have been built over time as passers-by added stones to existing cairns as an act of memorial. However, one factor for consideration when obtaining contextual information from el-Ga'ab is the remote location of some cairns and their distance from well-documented archaeological sites. Some are solitary in bare desert landscapes. These may they have been built by ancient desert herders. Pillar sites near Lake Turkana, monumental architecture with no

nearby signs of habitation, have been similarly attributed to early herders (Lynch and Robbins 1979; Nelson 1995) and might serve a similar purpose.

## References

- Bonnet, C. 1992. 'Excavations at the Nubian royal town of Kerma: 1975-91', *Antiquity* 66, 611-625.
- Brown, J. 1966. 'The excavation of a group of burial mounds at Ilkek, near Gilgil, Kenya', *Azania* 1, 59-77.
- Clack, T. and M. Brittain 2010. 'Excavations and surveys in Mursiland, S.W. Ethiopia, May-July 2009: A preliminary fieldwork report', *Nyame Akuma* 73, 65-76.
- Connerton, P. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge.
- Davies, M. 2012. 'BIEA archaeological surveys in the Juba-Nimule Nile region of South Sudan 2009', *Nyame Akuma* 78, 23-40.
- Davies, M. 2013. 'Clan and lineage based societies in African archaeology', in P. J. Mitchell and P. J. Lane (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of African Archaeology*. Oxford. <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199569885.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199569885-e-49> [accessed 16.09.2020].
- Lane, P. J., B. Straight and C. Hilton 2007. 'Excavations at Baawa, Samburu District, Kenya: preliminary report on the 2006 season', *Nyame Akuma* 68, 34-46.
- Lynch, B. M. and L. H. Robbins 1979. 'Cushitic and Nilotic Prehistory: New Archaeological Evidence from NW Kenya', *Journal of African History* 20(3), 319-328.
- Nelson, C. M. 1995. 'The work of the Koobi Fora Field School at the Jarigole Pillar Site', *Kenya Past and Present* 27, 496.
- Parkinson, J. 1935. 'The Stone Cairns of Northern Kenya', *Man* 35, 148-149.
- Posnansky, M. 1968. 'Cairns in the southern part of the Kenyan Rift Valley', *Azania* 2, 181-187.
- Robertshaw, P. T. 1986. 'Engaruka revisited: excavations of 1982', *Azania* 21, 1-26.
- Sassoon, H. 1966. 'Engaruka excavations during 1964', *Azania* 1, 79-100.
- Soper, R. and B. M. Lynch 1977. 'Stone-Circle Graves at Ng'amoritung'a', *Azania* 22, 193-208.
- Stiles, D. and S. C. Munro-Hay 1981. 'Stone cairn burials at Kokurmatakore, northern Kenya', *Azania* 16 (1), 151-166.
- Sutton, J. E. G. 1973. *The Archaeology of the Western Highlands of Kenya*. Nairobi.
- Tahir, Y. F. 2009. *The Archaeological, Ethnographical and Ecological Project of el-Ga'ab Depression in western Dongola Reach: A Report on the First Season 2009*. Department of Archaeology, University of Khartoum. Unpublished.
- Tahir, Y. F. 2010. *The Archaeological, Ethnographical and Ecological Project of el-Ga'ab Depression in western Dongola Reach: A Report on the Second Season 2010*. Department of Archaeology, University of Khartoum. Unpublished.
- Tahir, Y. F. 2011. *The Archaeological, Ethnographical and Ecological Project of el-Ga'ab Depression in western Dongola Reach: A Report on the Third Season 2009*. Department of Archaeology, University of Khartoum. Unpublished.
- Tahir, Y. F. 2014. *The Archaeological, Ethnographical and Ecological Project of el-Ga'ab Depression in western Dongola Reach: A Report on the Fourth Season 2013-2014*. Department of Archaeology, University of Khartoum. Unpublished.
- Tahir, Y. F. 2015. *The Archaeological, Ethnographical and Ecological Project of el-Ga'ab Depression in western Dongola Reach: A Report on the Fifth Season 2014-2015*. Department of Archaeology, University of Khartoum. Unpublished.
- Tahir, Y. F. 2016. *The Archaeological, Ethnographical and Ecological Project of el-Ga'ab Depression in western Dongola Reach: A Report on the Sixth Season 2015-2016*. Department of Archaeology, University of Khartoum. Unpublished.
- Tahir, Y. F. 2017. *The Archaeological, Ethnographical and Ecological Project of el-Ga'ab Depression in western Dongola Reach: A Report on the Seventh Season 2016-2017*. Department of Archaeology, University of Khartoum. Unpublished.
- Welsby, D. 2007. 'The Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project: excavations in the vicinity of ed-Doma (AKSE) and et-Tereif (AKSCW), 2006-2007', *Sudan & Nubia* 11, 15-19.