

SUDAN & NUBIA

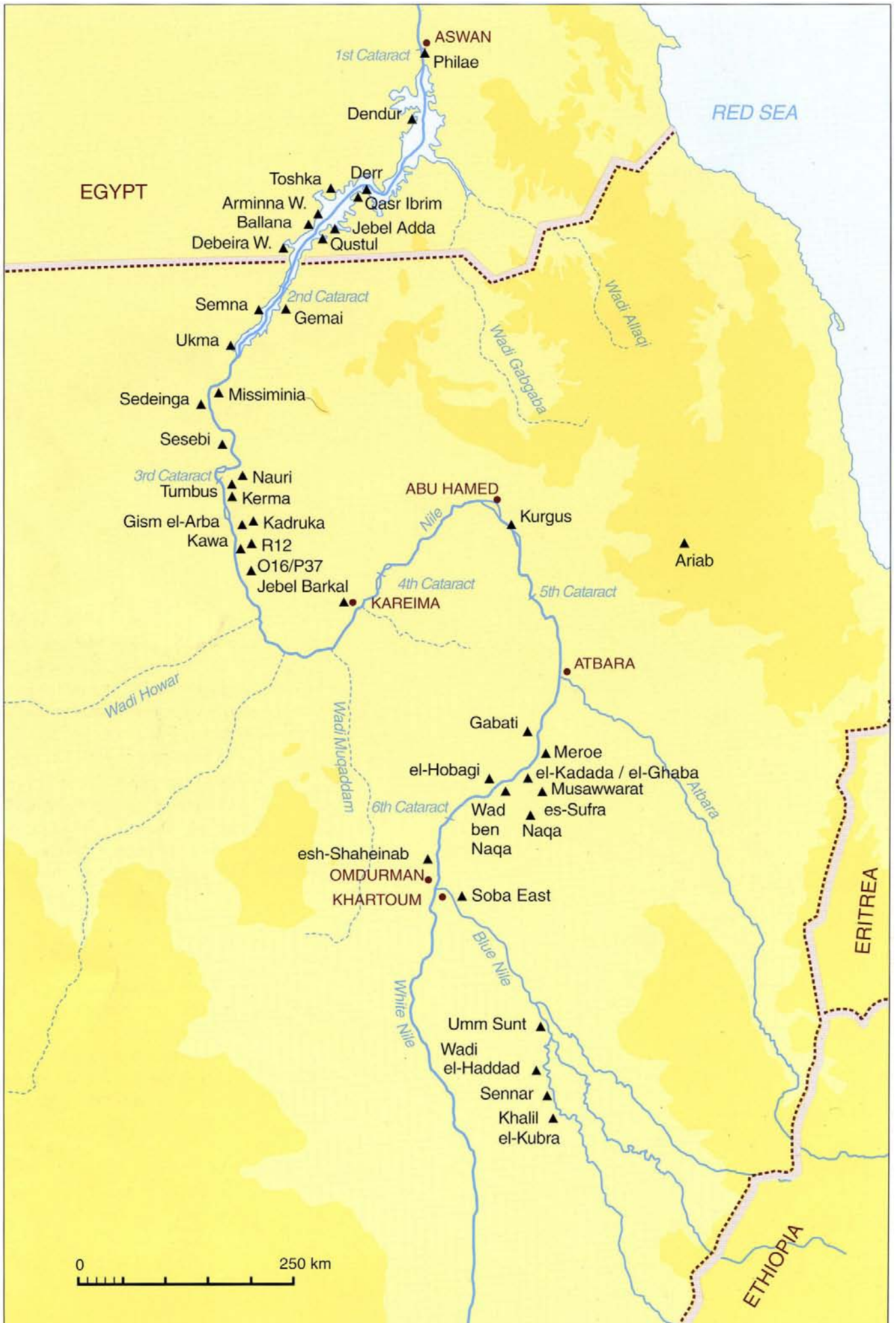
The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



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Front Cover: Beaker for funerary libation from el-Kadada, chalice shape, with incised geometric decoration, fired clay. Excavation n° KDD 76/3/59.

Introduction

Vivian Davies

The appearance of this, the fifth, issue of the Bulletin coincides with the tenth anniversary of our Society's founding. It has been an extraordinary first decade, remarkably productive in terms both of fieldwork and publication - one in which we have worked closely with our colleagues in the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums of the Sudan to fill gaps in the archaeological record and meet, wherever possible, the threats posed to archaeological sites by modern development. We have organized and supported eight major field-projects (in Soba East, the Northern Dongola Reach, Kawa, the Shendi-Atbara Reach, Gabati, the Bayuda Desert, the Fourth Cataract, and Kurgus) and published five memoirs (two others are in press at the time of writing), as well as *Sudan & Nubia*, an annual bulletin of reports 'fresh from the field'. Furthermore, we have held each year an international colloquium on current fieldwork and research, and we now additionally host the annual 'Kirwan Memorial Lecture', in memory of our distinguished first President.

The considerable funds needed to carry out this extensive programme have been forthcoming most substantially from the Bioanthropology Foundation and the British Museum, upon whose generosity we continue to rely, as we do also on that of the Society's individual Patrons. We intend to mark the Society's achievements with a special publication to be issued in the coming year. As to the future, the reports in this volume, on sites ranging in date from the Neolithic to the Mediaeval Period, amply demonstrate the huge potential for important new discoveries and scholarly progress in our area of interest, both in Sudan and Egypt, promising a second decade as exciting and rewarding as the first.

Excavations at Kurgus: The 2000 Season Results

Isabella Welsby Sjöström

The aims of this season were to establish the date of the fort (KRG2), and of the cemetery (KRG3) to the north of the Hagr el-Merwa, as well as to describe the tumuli in the cemetery and those which are dotted around the Hagr itself (for location of sites cf. Fig. 1 in V. Davies' article, *infra*). These aims were satisfactorily achieved. A summary of the results is presented in this article, while the full account of the excavations will be published in the final publication.

The team consisted of Renée Friedman and Joe Mayer, who supervised the excavation of the trench in the fort, Margaret Judd and Muawiya Ali, our Antiquities Inspector, who investigated the tumuli in the cemetery, and Gillian Pyke, finds recorder and house manager. A total of 15 local workmen were employed. The author was archaeological field director and photographer.

The Tumuli by the Hagr el-Merwa (KRG1)

Fifteen tumuli surround the rock, all conforming to the types of superstructure found at the main cemetery. One was of type 1A, four of type 2, two of type 4A, five of type 5, two of type 7 and one of type 9 (for descriptions of the various types, see below). These tumuli are built of predominantly white quartzite stones, as discussed below.

The Fort (KRG2) – Trench A

The fort, which lies on the east bank of the Nile, is a square structure, mainly built of mud brick, measuring approximately 72m along each side, with rounded corner towers on the north-east and north-west corners, and square interval towers on the north and east sides, the only ones where the ground plan is clear enough to make out such features (for a plan see Welsby Sjöström 1998, fig. 6).

As we already knew from observation of the surface pottery scatter in the fort, it certainly had been inhabited during the Medieval period (Welsby Sjöström 1998), when it lay on the borders of the Medieval Kingdoms of Makouria and Alwa (el Abwab). However, while the plan and construction techniques used also suggested a Medieval date, this did not rule out an earlier origin for the structure. Arkell (1950, 39) had argued that the fort had its origins in the Pharaonic period, and this premise needed to be investigated. A trench (Trench A) initially measuring 8 x 3m was opened in the more low lying area of the fort, inside the eastern perimeter wall (Fig. 1).

Features revealed within the trench included the badly pitted inner face of the fort wall, three internal walls on the same alignment as the main wall, a mastaba (running into the south section) and a patch of beaten earth floor, which pre-

dates both the mastaba and the fort. No clearly defined floor was found associated with the fort itself, but a strata of dense, compacted mud including mud-brick fragments, ash and charcoal may have been used as a floor makeup. This layer covered the mastaba, which was not associated with any hard surface, but was built on the same sandy layer as the fort walls.

The main fort wall survives to a height of 2.06m, with a foundation course of bricks laid 'on their swords' (on edge as headers). The internal wall that runs parallel with the defensive wall also has a foundation course of bricks on edge, but placed at an angle to the wall itself. No construction trenches were found for either wall (the only two which were excavated to foundation level); both walls sit on a layer of clean wind-blown sand, overlying an ashy midden deposit.

Subsequent to the abandonment of the fort the area had been heavily pitted, which may have destroyed any floor surfaces. The fills of these pits included medieval pottery sherds, animal bone (including pig, identified by Kim Burrows), and a small amount of glass and metal fragments. A large deposit of stamped mud bungs was also found along the main (external) wall of the fort and extended towards the inner wall. These were stamped in Old Nubian and/or possibly Coptic, while at least one fragment had an Arabic inscription, so far

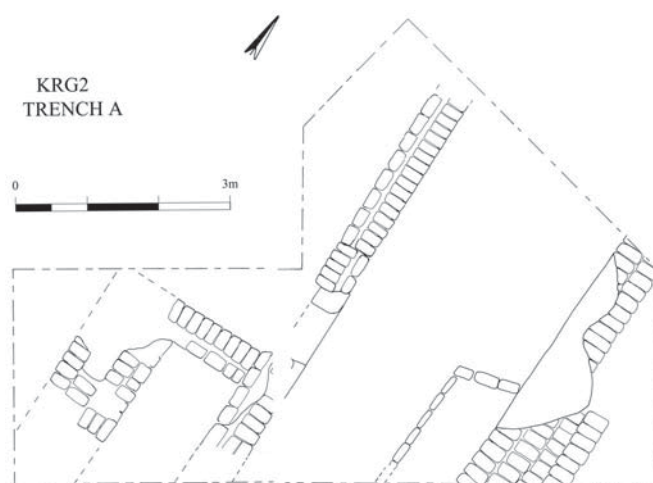


Figure 1. Plan of the excavations in the fort (KRG2),

undeciphered, but all the more interesting for being a rarity in Nubia. The imprint of a leaf was found on the underside of one of the few nearly complete bungs, the leaf clearly being used to protect the contents of the vessel from the mud of the bung, or alternatively the bung from any liquid contents (Fig. 2). These types of vessel seals have parallels in Coptic Egypt and a larger variant without inscriptions was found in a large deposit in Building D at Soba (Ballet 1991, 498-499; Allason-Jones 1991, 151-157, see also Phillips 1994).

Excavation was continued below the primary fort walls, yielding Post-Meroitic style pottery from the pre-fort levels (Fig. 3). At a depth of 3.5m from the present day surface a deposit of what appeared to be sterile Nile silt was encountered, which was cut by two small pits (or very large post-

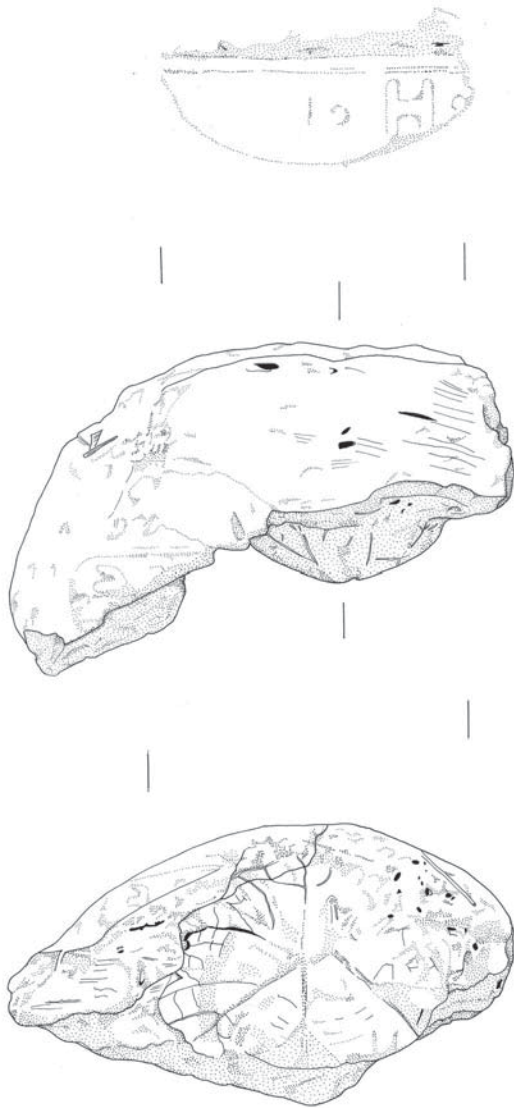


Figure 2. Mud Bung from KRG2, Trench A (24)
(drawn by Gillian Pyke).

holes). At this point the area under excavation had shrunk to 1.35 x 1.4m and excavation was halted and the trench backfilled; the depth of the trench made it both dangerous and ineffective to continue.

In conclusion, it has now been established beyond reasonable doubt that the fort is not earlier than and probably post-dates the Post-Meroitic period, and was in use well into the Medieval period, as the Christian pottery found on the surface suggested.

The Cemetery (KRG3)

During the 1998 season a plan was made of the cemetery, but time did not allow us to describe the 316 tumuli individually. Consequently, the aims of the 2000 season were to describe the tumuli and to excavate a selection of the different types to date them (if possible). Accordingly, the typology sketched out in the earlier season was refined and all the tumuli superstructures in the cemetery were allocated types;

nine types and six sub-types were established.

The cemetery lies some 200m to the north of the Hagr el-Merwa, stretching over the low plateau and down the slope towards the railway line, covering an area of some 2000m². Because of the rocky nature of the ground, both on the plateau and on the slope to west and south, the burials were extremely shallow in the majority of cases, the average grave cut depth being approximately 25cm. Consequently the burials were quick to excavate, allowing us to investigate a total of eight tumuli during the three week season. With the exception of grave (126), which is Medieval (the deepest, at 86cm below surface level), the other graves are most likely Post-Meroitic in date, to judge by the few scraps of pottery found. The burials contained little in the way of grave goods apart from a few pottery sherds, a number of disc beads and one ceramic feeder cup.

The superstructures of the tumuli were variously constructed of black stones, probably ferruginous sandstone, and / or white quartzite, as well as gravel. At KRG3 the colour of the stones used is mostly black, while the tumuli by the Hagr are predominantly white, suggesting that the colour of the stones used was determined by the most readily available material and may have no other significance. One could speculate that it was a mark of distinction to be buried near the Hagr; however, excavation is necessary to investigate this point; in the absence of grave goods this may not be possible to prove conclusively. The easternmost tumuli are all gravel covered (but with no higher concentration of gravel than the surrounding terrain) and are indeed located at some distance from where either black or white stone occurs naturally.

Five of the excavated internments had not been disturbed, two had definitely been robbed, and one contained four faience disc beads but no skeleton at all, although the fill of the grave was sieved and no discernible traces of robbing were noted.

Of the six burials investigated on the plateau five were found to contain infants or children, while the two burials excavated on the slope to the west were of adults, one also containing a few bones belonging to an infant. In view of the random sample of tumuli chosen for excavation, this might be taken to suggest that the whole of the plateau was reserved for internments of the young and very young. The adult grave on the plateau was a box grave, belonging to a later period than the round tomb superstructures.

Type 1 (shown in red on the plan, Colour Plate XLI, cf. also Plate 1). Cairns constructed with either large (T1A) or small to medium size black stones (T1B). At KRG3 there are nine tumuli of type 1A and 100 of type 1B, the most common in the cemetery (and also the easiest to build).

Cairn (116), Sub-type 1A (Diameter 3m, Height 50cm), contained the skeleton of an infant at a depth of 31cm, lying in the foetal position; the skull was visible at 15cm below ground level. The head was to the north, facing west.

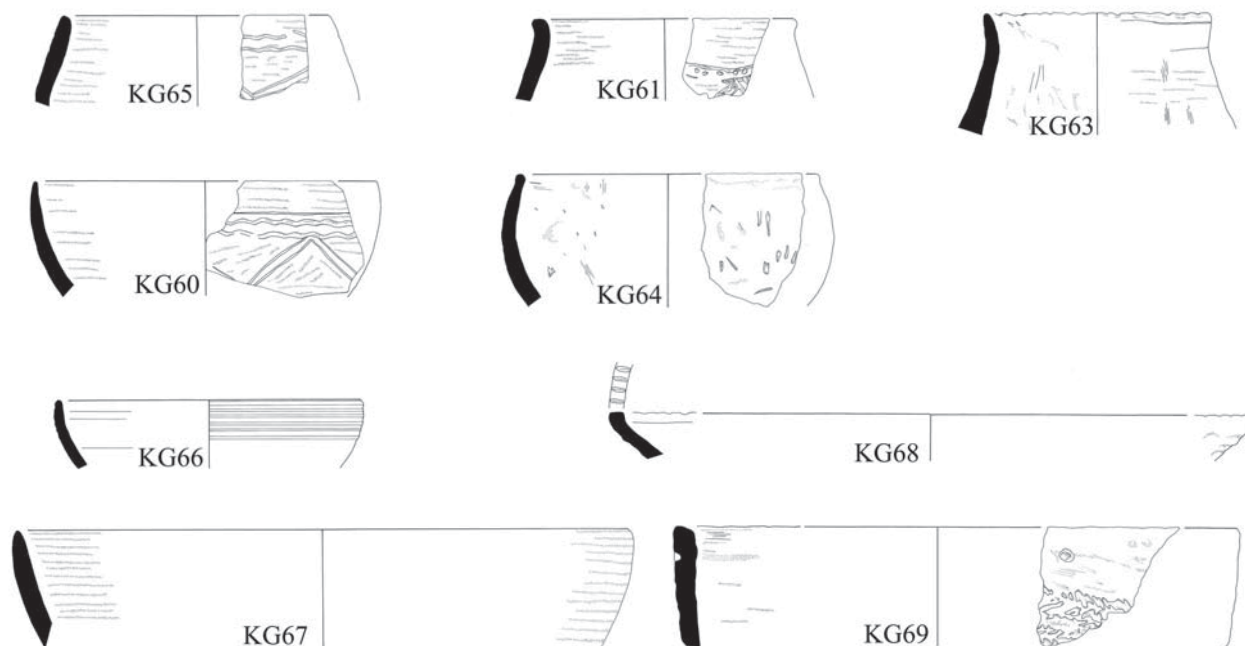


Figure 3. Pottery forms from the pre-fort levels at KRG2, Trench A.

Several bones were missing, probably due to wind and animal action, as the body was covered with piled up stones, at first allowing air to circulate around the body before sand blew in to 'seal' the burial. The soil around the body appeared to have been moistened at the time of the burial.

Tumulus (107), Sub-type 1B (Diameter 2.5m, Height 35cm), was undisturbed. The grave cut was irregular, due to the stony nature of the soil, and contained an adult at a depth of 41cm. The head was to the north, facing west-south-west, with the body very tightly contracted, chin on knees, due to the small size of the grave cut. The bones had been crushed by the stones used in the fill, which also contained a few pottery sherds.

Type 2 (yellow on plan) was a round structure with straight, or on occasion battered sides, three or four courses high, with a flat top, covered with gravel. Forty eight such structures were recorded.

Tumulus (199) (Diameter 3.15m, Height 56cm) was undisturbed and contained an infant in a contracted position, head to the west, in a 30cm deep burial pit. This burial contained the only complete pottery vessel from the cemetery, a feeder cup.

Type 3 (black on plan) had a ring of mostly black stones with sparse gravel in the interior. This type may be the result of robbing, but the fairly regular shape of the ring and the consistency of the type would argue against this. There are 62 such features at KRG3.

Tumulus (150) (Diameter 3m, Height 20cm), containing an infant, had been disturbed; human bones and beads of ostrich eggshell and faience were found in the fill. The body was most likely buried with the head to north, at a depth of 66cm. A large Post-Meroitic (?) sherd was found in the fill,

and may have been used as a digging tool.

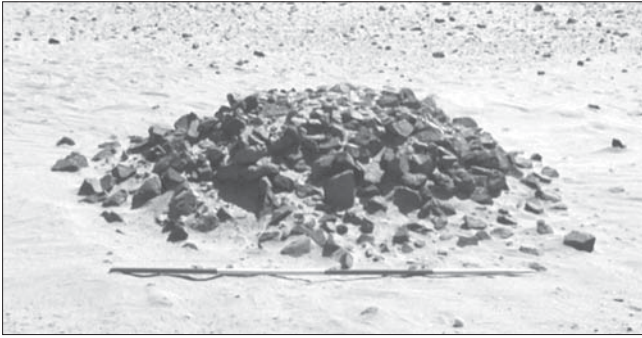
Type 4 (dark green on plan). Box graves were either constructed of stones piled up high (T4A), of which there are 13, or were flat topped (T4B), of which there are eight.

Grave (126), Sub-type 4B (Dimensions 2.8 x 1.5m, Height 50cm), contained the undisturbed skeleton of an articulated adult, lying east-west, on its back, in an extended position with the skull slightly angled south. The grave pit was 89cm deep, the body covered by a layer of black ferruginous sandstone slabs at a depth of 59cm. This grave cut through an earlier burial of whose superstructure, assuming there had been one, no trace remained.

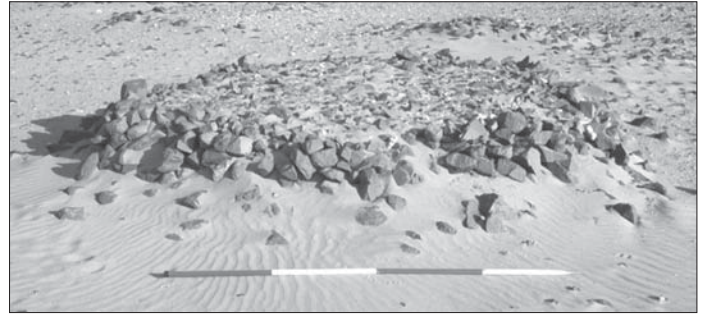
Type 5 (purple on plan). Shallow-domed tumuli, covered in small to medium-sized black stones. There are 27 tumuli of this type at KRG3.

Tumulus (36) (Diameter 7m, Height 50cm) was excavated and found to contain an adult, with only the lower legs still *in situ*, angled north-west. Some disarticulated foetal bones were also found comingled with the adult remains, suggesting that the burial originally contained both an adult (female?) and a new or still-born infant. The head of the adult would have been lying to the north and facing west. There was no sign on the surface that the grave had been disturbed, but part of the grave cut itself was ill defined, presumably where it had been destroyed by the robber cut, and the absence of part of the skeleton clearly proves that this was the case. No grave goods were found; if there were any, these would presumably have been removed by the robbers.

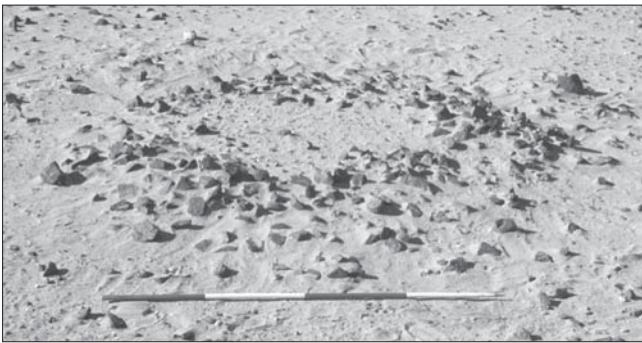
Type 6 (light green on plan). Pebble covered tumuli (T6A), in a few cases with the appearance of a 'dromos' laid out on the tumulus itself, facing east (T6B). There are 25 tumuli of sub-type 6A and only two of sub-type 6B.



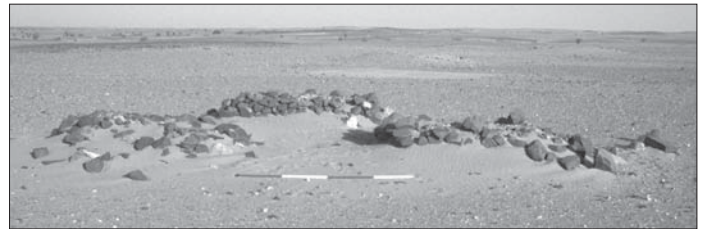
a. Type 1.



b. Type 2.



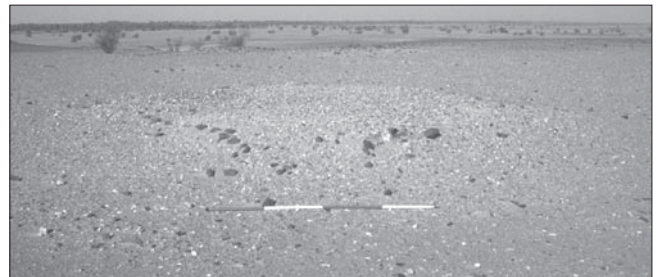
c. Type 3.



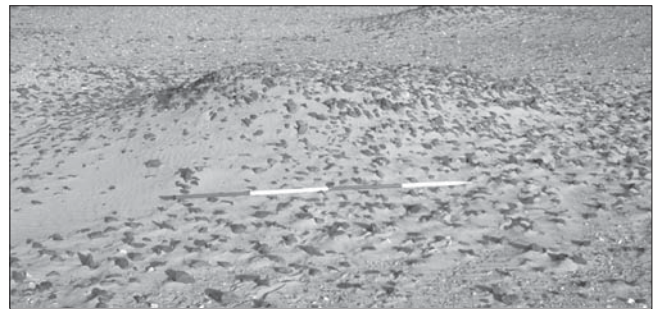
d. Type 4.



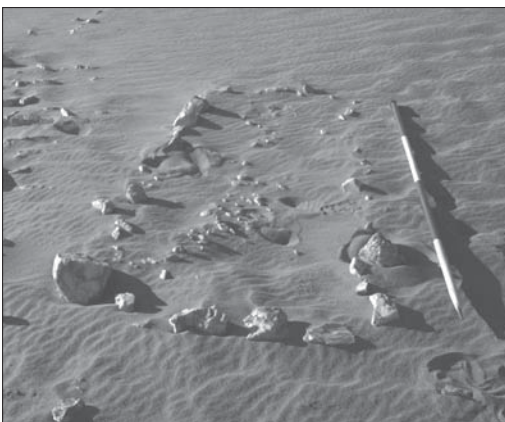
e. Type 5.



f. Type 6.



h. Type 8.



g. Type 7.

i. Type 9.

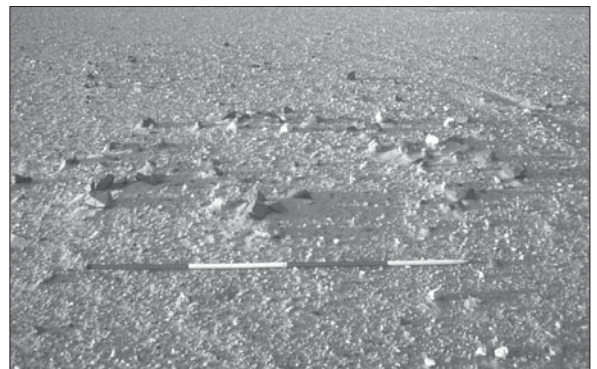


Plate 1. Photographs of the various types of grave monument.

Tumulus (211), Sub-type 6A (Diameter 5m, Height 22cm), was excavated. The grave cut was very shallow, only 23cm deep, oriented east-west. It had contained, or was intended for, an infant to judge by the size of the grave cut, but no bones were found despite sieving of the fill; four disc beads were recovered. There was no trace whatsoever of a robber cut.

Type 7 (stippled on plan). The outline of a rectangle of stones laid flush with the ground, roughly aligned north-south. This type was very rare; only one example was found at KRG3 and two at KRG1. No example of this type was excavated.

Type 8 (blue on plan). 'Wedge'-shaped tumuli of black stones, the wedge possibly due to robbing, although the evidence of the excavated tumulus is not conclusive. There are 19 tumuli of this type.

Tumulus (237) (Diameter 4.5m, Height 70cm), containing a child/juvenile, was excavated. The body was orientated east-west, lying at a depth of 10cm. It was articulated but badly damaged, and lay on its back, with the legs flexed to the north. The body was surrounded by stones, apparently deliberately arranged. No grave goods were found.

Type 9 (black circle with white interior on plan). Ring of stones flush with the ground surface. There are 15 tumuli of this type. No example of the type was excavated.

Some fairly close parallels to the superstructure types are to be found in the Scandinavian Joint Expedition concession area in Lower Nubia, where, as at Kurgus, the three basic superstructures consist of rings, tumuli and rectangular monuments, i.e. box graves, all of which occur in numerous variations and are built of various materials, e.g. sand, silt, stones or mud brick. The mixture of Post-Meroitic / X-Group and Christian burials in the same cemetery is not unusual (Säve-Söderbergh 1982, 6-7 and *passim*).

In the case of the Christian period box grave excavated, this was found to have cut an earlier burial whose superstructure had been removed, suggesting the possibility that the centrally located box graves were placed in the centre of the cemetery for a reason, perhaps to be near the largest cairn, and not because the area was empty of graves.

Conclusion

Following the completion of the deep trial trench in the fort and the excavation of eight randomly selected tumuli in the cemetery there seems to be little doubt that the use of these areas dates to the Post-Meroitic and Medieval periods; so far we have no evidence for a Pharaonic settlement at Kurgus contemporary with the inscriptions on the Hagr el-Merwa, despite the reference Arkell makes to seeing some Pharaonic pottery at the cemetery. The registers of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums in Khartoum were consulted, but no entry exists for such an accession.

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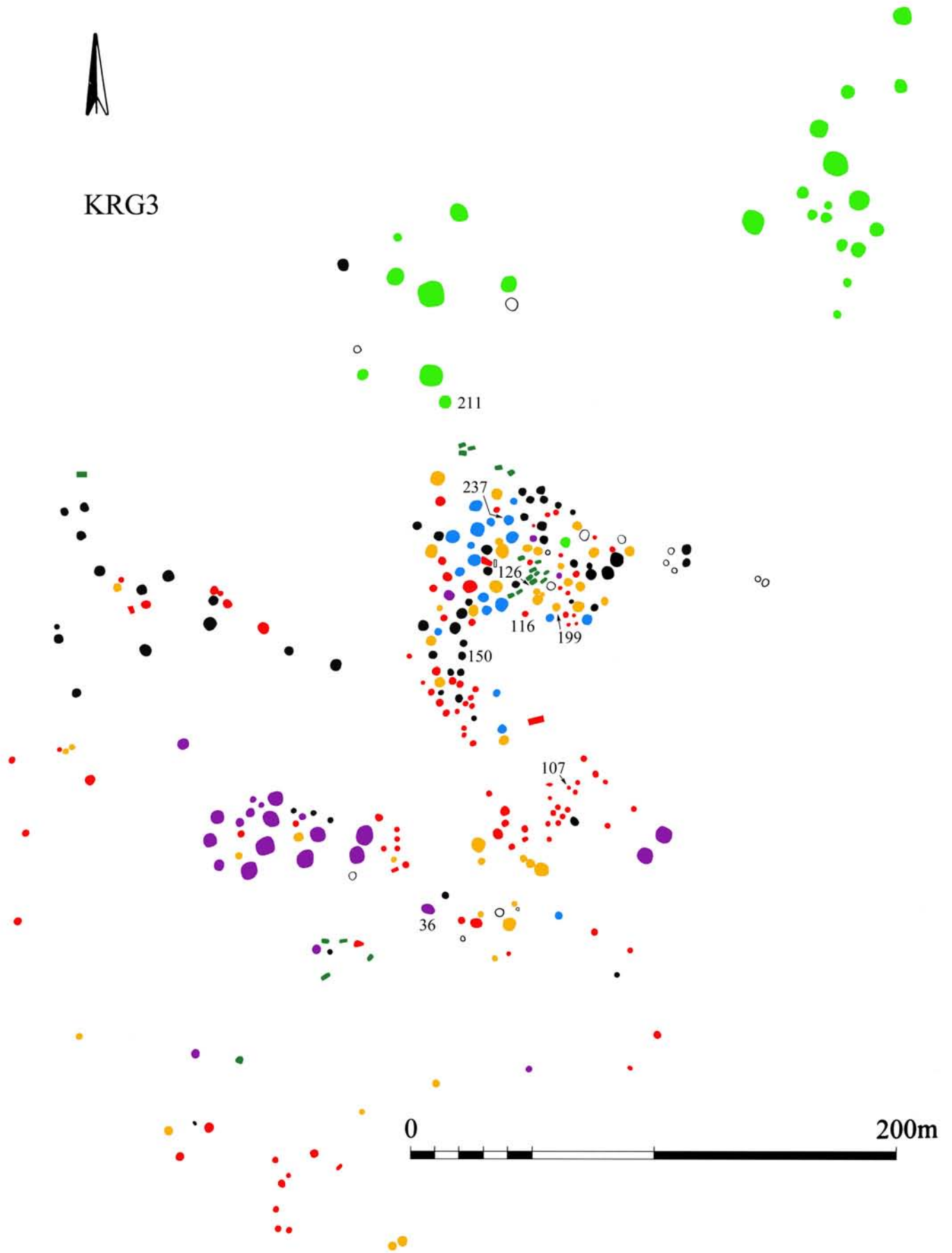


Plate XLI. Kurgus; plan of cemetery KRG3.