

SUDAN & NUBIA

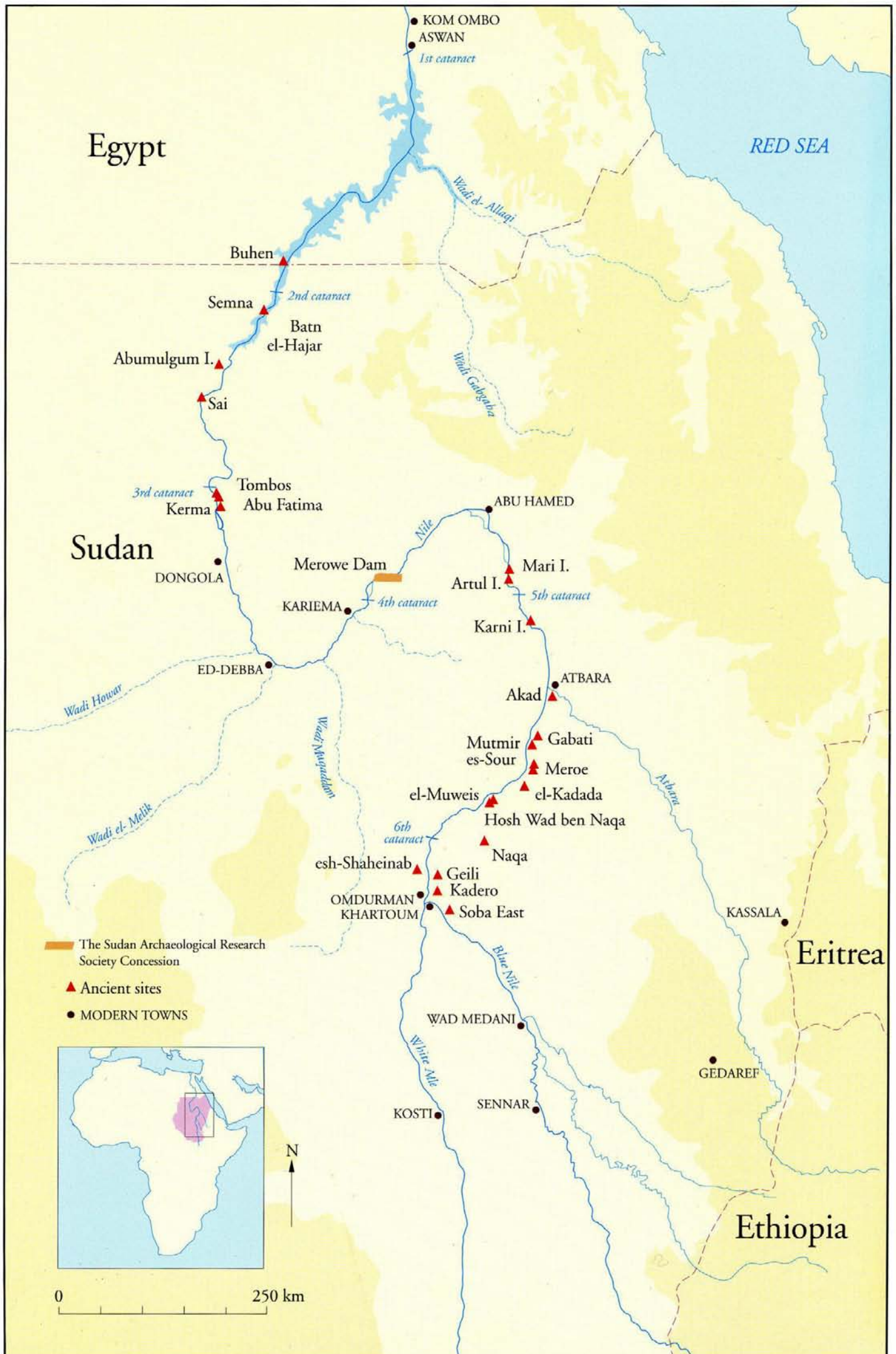
The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



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2005





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Front Cover: Representation of a bound Kushite from the
Mortuary Temple of Amenhotep III at Kom el-Hettân
(photo © Memnon/Amenhotep III Project).

Excavation of the Late Kushite and Medieval settlement on Umm Muri

John Payne

The site, designated 3-J-5, is located on the uninhabited island of Umm Muri (Colour plate IV) and was first discovered during the 1999 SARS survey (Welsby 2003, 5-7, pl. 2.1). It is defined by a large scatter of ceramics, stone cereal grinding bases (Usai 2003, 106-9, pls 5.10, 5.11) and a number of mud-brick and dry-stone walls.

The initial survey was followed in 2003-2004 by a small evaluation of the site, consisting of three test pits excavated in order to assess the depth and nature of the archaeological remains (Fuller 2004, 8-10). This evaluation indicated that the archaeological deposits across the whole of the site were likely to be quite shallow and comprised of mud-brick and stone structures of late Meroitic date. Within test pit 7HC, these mud-brick structures were seen to overlay a series of pits and post-holes which although stratigraphically earlier than the mud-brick structure were otherwise undated.

The aims of the 2004-2005 season were to reveal a larger area of the site in plan by linking the three previous test pits, selectively excavate areas within this larger area in order to better understand phasing and construction techniques within the late Meroitic settlement, attempt to date and better understand the post alignments and ascertain whether the large dry-stone wall visible at the eastern extent of the visible remains did indeed mark the eastern limit of the settlement, as suggested by the previous evaluation. Alongside this work it was decided to produce a basic 1:200 scale plan on which was plotted the limits of the ceramic scatters and which served to highlight areas of bare rock within the settlement area in which the archaeological horizon had been lost.

The work was undertaken by a team of eight archaeologists and an NCAM inspector¹ plus a local workforce of up to 40 persons over a period of around ten weeks. Within this period, an area of approximately 1800m² was excavated which probably represents approximately a 15% sample of the archaeological remains of the Umm Muri settlement (Colour plate V).

¹ The team consisted of Nick Corcos (archaeologist), Kat Manning (archaeologist, animal bone specialist), Eric McCann (pottery specialist), Paul Murray (archaeologist), Dave McNicol (archaeologist), John Payne (director), Adam Stone (archaeologist), Nialla Fayer-Kerr (archaeologist, BIEA graduate scholar) and Abdel Rahman Abdel Fatah Ali Siddiq (NCAM inspector). The team was greatly assisted for part of the season by Nasreen Sedek Yahya. Neal Spencer joined the project for one month.

Phase 1

The earliest phase recognised was located within the central area of the excavation directly to the north of evaluation test pit 7HC. It consisted of a suite of three roughly square rooms each measuring approximately 3 x 3m with distinctive rounded corners (Plate 1, Figure 1). The walls, constructed of small stones set into a mass of mud, survived to a height of around 300mm and were rendered both internally and externally with a fine mud plaster. The plaster within the interior of the structure showed evidence of simple painted decoration. Floor surfaces were also revealed, although no internal features were noted. It seems likely that the rooms revealed do not represent the original limits of this structure, and it is possible that it extended both northwards and westwards, although due to time constraints this could not be proven.



Plate 1. The Phase 1 building looking north.

Directly to the south of this structure were the post-holes and pits partly revealed in the previous season's evaluation. Within these, curvilinear alignments of post-holes could be recognised and some appeared to abut the southern wall of the Phase 1 building (Plate 2). It is therefore likely that some of the post-holes represent ancillary structures associated with this phase. One pit contained a large number of loom weights (Plate 3).

Phase 2

An expansion or reconstruction of the Phase 1 structure to the west (Figure 1). This phase also marked a change in construction technique from stones set in mud to mud brick, which continued throughout the subsequent phases. Two rooms were recognised dating to this phase; both were rectangular in plan and aligned north-south. The easternmost of the two abutted the western wall of the Phase 1 structure, and although clearly of a later phase there was some evidence to suggest that they were built directly onto an earlier foundation. Within the easternmost of these additional rooms evidence of an internal division was recognised in

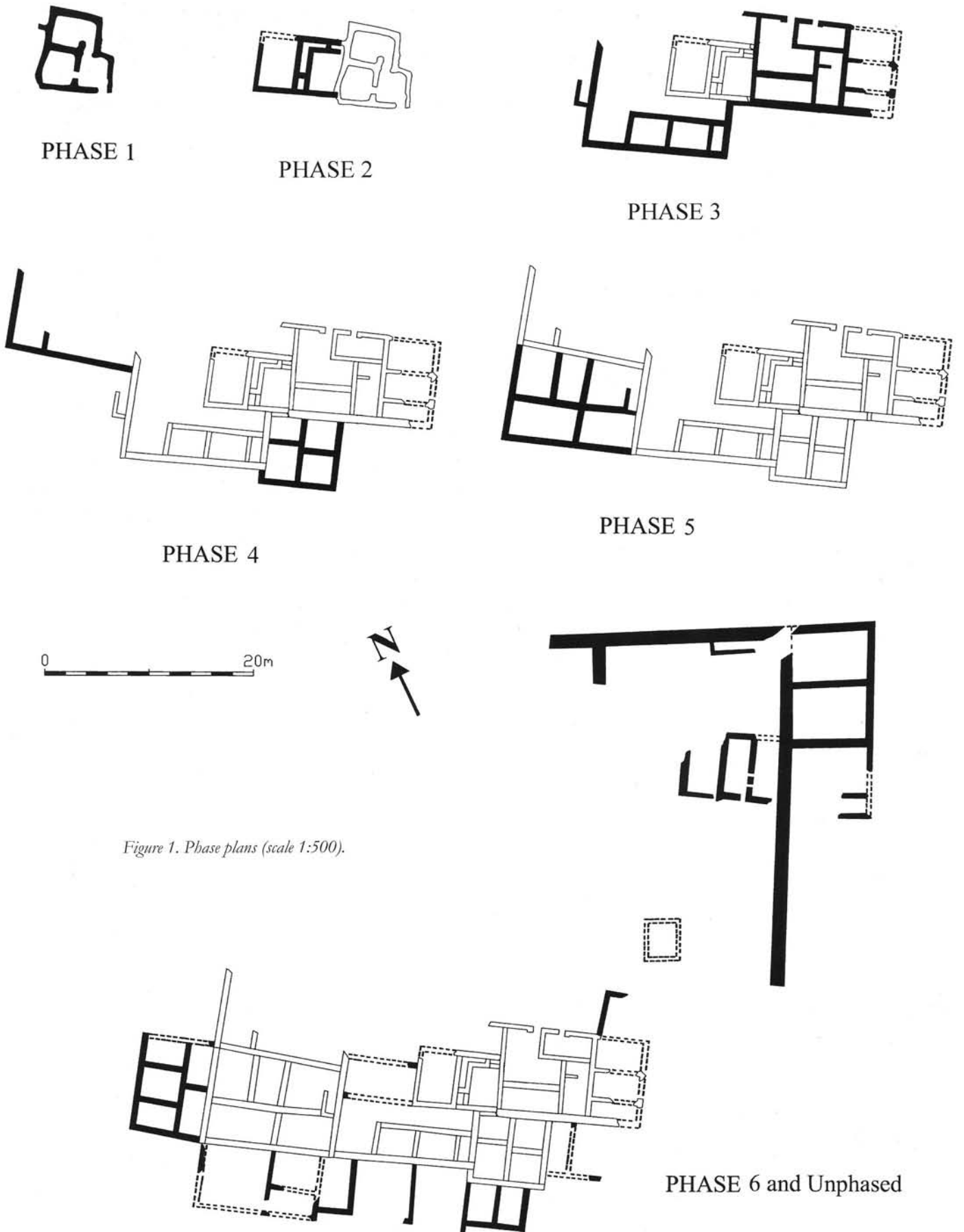


Figure 1. Phase plans (scale 1:500).



Plate 2. Post-holes associated with the Phase 1 building.

the form of a small brick structure located in the north-west corner of the room. This consisted of an 'L'-shaped tank which abutted and utilised the wall of the room as part of its construction. This tank was rendered both internally and externally with a fine mud plaster. The function of this feature is uncertain, although its similarity to storage bins seen at Meinarti, for example, may give a possible explanation.

Phase 3

This phase appeared to represent a dramatic expansion of the structure which involved the demolition and levelling of the Phase 1 building and the construction of a suite of at least ten additional rooms (Figure 1). The Phase 2 building appeared to be incorporated within this new phase of construction. All of the new rooms were rectangular in plan



Plate 3. Loom weights from a pit associated with the Phase 1 building.

with the majority being aligned east-west. Seven of these rooms were to the east of the Phase 2 structure some of which overlay the Phase 1 building. The three remaining rooms identified within this phase were located to the south of the Phase 2 building. Within two of these three rooms there was clear evidence of *in-situ* burning which possibly indicates areas associated with food preparation. If this is correct, one could hypothesize that these structures were deliberately detached from the main dwelling as a safeguard against fire, a phenomenon still seen within the traditional style buildings used today. Floor surfaces within this phase of construction were sporadic, with later pits causing areas of truncation. The intervening space, between the three isolated rooms and the associated structures, was linked by a wall which appeared to form part of a larger enclosed area which, due to its size, has been interpreted as an open courtyard.

Phase 4

The structures identified within the Phase 4 construction could actually represent two or three additional phases as it includes two separate expansions of the Phase 3 building both to the west and south, plus the insertion of additional walls within the Phase 3 structure (Figure 1).

The western extension consisted of an 'L'-shaped wall which abutted the western wall of the earlier Phase 3 structure. This 'L'-shaped wall represents the southern and western walls of a new structure. The eastern side of this new building would have been formed by the existing Phase 3 building. The interior of this new structure and its northern extent would have lain on an area of higher ground to the northwest of the Phase 3 building. The higher location of this structure has resulted in its northern extent being totally destroyed by wind erosion. A single fragment of abutting wall gives some indication of the existence of the internal divisions within this structure.

The southern expansion associated with this phase comprised a suite of four rooms which were partly excavated as part of the previous season's work (test pit 7HC). These rooms which are roughly square in plan, partly abut the Phase 3 building. The walls were particularly thick and although they survived to a height of around 400mm they show no evidence of door openings. This possibly could indicate that originally they were accessed from above, and could represent storage areas. This construction phase was seen to overlie the post-hole structures which are thought to be associated with the Phase 1 building. Therefore with the construction of this phase it is clear that the post-hole structures were no longer in use, although it is likely that they had disappeared earlier, contemporary with the demolition of the Phase 1 structures.

Phase 5

Another westwards expansion to existing structures utilised both the western wall of the Phase 3 structure and the southern wall of the Phase 4 structure in its construction. It



comprised a suite of five rectangular rooms aligned both north-south and east-west (Figure 1). The earlier walls onto which this construction phase abutted showed evidence of external rendering which continued behind the later abutment. This clearly indicates a later addition rather than phasing within a continuous construction. The preservation of internal surfaces within this phase was sporadic, due to a combination of variable erosion and later pit cutting. This additional suite of rooms possibly formed a distinct dwelling.

Phase 6

This phase is likely to represent two distinct phases as the quality of construction between these additions differed greatly. However, as no stratigraphic link existed between them, this is at present impossible to prove. Both abutted the Phase 5 structure (Figure 1).

The first abutted its western wall and again comprised a suite of five rooms. As with the previous phase all were rectangular in plan and aligned both north-south and east-west, although the area covered is approximately half that of the Phase 5 structure. The second of the previous season's test pits was located within this structure. Within two of the rooms which comprise this suite, successive floor deposits were revealed plus evidence of entrances which again showed successive episodes of raising and resurfacing. This suggests that the structure was relatively long lived, although it is clearly late within the overall phasing of the site.

The second suite of rooms was located to the south of the earlier phase building. This again comprised rectangular rooms aligned both north-south and east-west which abutted the earlier buildings. The construction of these structures did appear to be far less robust than the surrounding buildings, their wall being only a single brick length thick. Again floor surfaces were sporadic and later pit cutting seemed particularly severe, making any more detailed interpretation difficult.

The eastern part of the site

This area included the third of the test pits from the previous evaluation which had focused on the large stone wall (Plate 4), which was thought to mark the eastern limit of the settlement. This wall, which was over 1m wide, survived for a considerable distance both north-south and east-west. However the area excavated and recorded in detail measured approximately 35m north-south x 25m east-west. This excavation revealed the existence of mud-brick structures on either side of the stone wall. To the east of the large stone wall a suite of at least three large rectangular rooms was investigated. Each measured around 7 x 5m and although they were constructed from a combination of both mud brick and mud and stone they seem likely to represent a single phase. These three rooms incorporated the stone wall as part of their construction. This indicated that the limit of the settlement lay further to the east than was origi-



Plate 4. The stone wall looking south from the junction of the north and east walls.

nally anticipated, although it is possible that the large stone wall did at some time represent the eastern limit of the settlement. To the west of the stone wall further evidence of rectangular mud-brick structures was revealed which again utilised the stone wall within their construction (Colour plate VI). However truncation within this area was again severe with the majority of the structures surviving for only a single brick thickness, and any floor surfaces surviving as isolated patches. In these rooms were a number of pottery vessels containing animal bone and charcoal and a sequence of ovens (Plate 5).



Plate 5. A sequence of large cylindrical-bodied pottery vessels re-used as ovens.

As a consequence of this truncation very little phasing was apparent within this area of the site; however, a series of pots set into pits which clearly cut through some of the walls did seem to indicate the presence of later, although now eroded, dwellings.

The area which linked this area of activity and the phased

structures to the west was excavated but unfortunately revealed only the scantest evidence of archaeological remains. Despite this it seems likely that this apparently blank area did originally contain a similar number of structures, which have suffered from severe erosion.

Although the majority of the site appeared as a well organised, fairly regular settlement, a series of poorly constructed curvilinear walls were seen within the north-western limit of the excavation. These appear to intrude into the proposed alignments of the partly eroded regular structures. It, therefore, seems probable that these irregular structures represent the only recognisable remains of a later phase of settlement which has elsewhere been totally eroded away. The function of these irregular walls seems most likely to be associated with animal management. The presence of Christian period ceramics on the surface of the site suggest a date for this phase of occupation.

An initial interpretation of the evolution of the Umm Muri settlement would envisage an early phase of irregular mud and stone and timber-post structures which were gradually superseded by regular mud brick and stone buildings. The stratigraphic evidence appears to suggest that this more regular construction phase commenced in the north-eastern part of the island (the higher ground) and gradually evolved both westwards and southwards (down slope). Whether this observation of higher ground being favoured for early settlement can be applied to all of the unexcavated areas of higher ground, which are located to the east of the excavation, remains unclear. This phase of regular settlement structures is likely to have been replaced at some time in the Christian period by a more organic looking settlement of which only a small portion was recognised in these excavations.

Among the finds were a small number of painted Meroitic sherds (Colour plate VII) and what may be the lid of a glazed composition box with a reclining leopard (Colour plate VIII).²

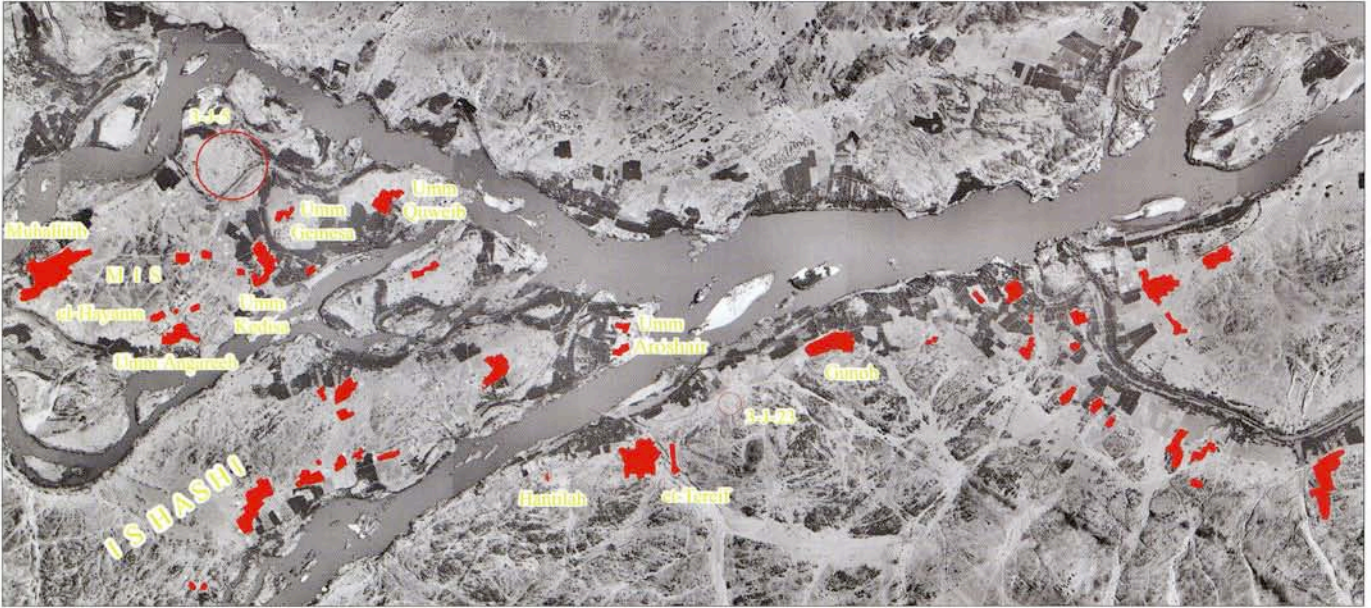
Acknowledgements

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² For what may be a very similar piece, also thought to be a box lid, from Kumbur, north of Aksha, and dated to the 1st century AD, see Maystre 1975, 91, fig. 35; Wenig 1978, 256, 258; Wildung 1997, 363.



Colour plate IV. Umm Muri. Location of sites 3-J-5 and 3-J-23 and the modern villages.



Colour plate V. Umm Muri. General view of the excavations.



Colour plate VI. Umm Muri. General view of the excavations.



Colour plate VII.
Umm Muri.
Meroitic painted
sherds.



Colour plate VIII.
Umm Muri.
Leopard reclining on
a box lid(?).