

# SUDAN & NUBIA

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Front cover. Block 1000.0049 from Naga (photograph courtesy Karla Kroper).

Above. Pottery jar with decoration of sorghum heads from BMC 60, Berber (photograph courtesy Mahmoud Suliman Bashir).

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# The Centre for Darfur Heritage at Nyala University: a driver for cultural development

Gafar A. F. Ibrahim

## Introduction

As part of their policies in education, community service and engagement, higher education institutions can play a key role over the long-term in rethinking and developing scientific theory and practice to promote the protection and safeguarding of cultural heritage. The Centre for Darfur Heritage at the University of Nyala in South Darfur was established in 2013 to act as a think tank and hub for the conservation and safeguarding of Darfur's cultural heritage. Prior to its founding, no effort had been made nationally to study and investigate the cultural heritage of this country since its incorporation into the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan in 1916.

The Centre is a unique academic initiative set up to conduct professional research, lead, carry-out and coordinate local, national, and international efforts to promote cultural diversity and social inclusion. The most significant contributions of this institution so far have focused on the founding of an academic museum, a digital archive, and participation in the implementation of a field project aimed at integrating cultural heritage into a teaching and community-based research curriculum. Its strategic policies aim to build sustainable human cultural development.<sup>1</sup>

Darfur is a cultural corridor to Egypt, Nubia, the Mediterranean and the African Sahel. After decades of the marginalisation of Darfur, one of the twin kingdoms that formed the modern Anglo-Egyptian Sudan along with Sennar, the Centre for Darfur Heritage at the University of Nyala was established with the rationale for conducting studies and research, and to reinforce collaborations.<sup>2</sup> The Centre's main objectives are to protect, safeguard and promote theory and good practice in cultural heritage studies. It is also intended to advance the interpretation and understanding of the cultural diversity of the more than thirty ethnic groups of sedentary and nomadic peoples within Darfur. This is to be based upon cultural investment and is intended to be a driver of growth and development. This paper will investigate the various ways in which the Centre for Darfur Heritage can serve as a driver for cultural development.

## Darfur: a brief background

Darfur is a vast territory currently formed of five states in western Sudan. It is a land of state formation and divine kingship. It was an independent country from 1603-1874 and again from 1898-1916. In terms of research conducted by archaeologists, linguists, and anthropologists, it has been one of the most neglected areas in Africa (regarding the history of linguistic study, see Stevenson 1962; 1964, 79). Ancient trans-desert routes led to this region passing through a series of wells and oases, in particular, the *Darb el*

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO in its *World Culture Report* published in 2000, subtitled '*Cultural diversity, conflict and pluralism*' addresses these issues, and cultural identity, heritage and development are enshrined as part of UNESCO's cultural mandate (UNESCO 2000). The World Heritage Centre of the UNESCO has developed close relationships with academia through building the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme on Heritage in 1992. Nyala University is planning to join this programme as the Darfur region has no similar initiative.

<sup>2</sup> The Centre has maintained good relationships with different institutions including the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, Sudan (NCAM), the Institute of African and Asian Studies at University of Khartoum, the University of Fasher, and the University of N'Djamina and Absher Institute in Chad. It participated in the Western Sudan Community Museums (WSCM) workshops organised by the ICCROM Sharjah Office in collaboration with the British Council, NCAM, British Institute in Eastern Africa, Aliph Foundation, and the Africa Institute Sharjah, between 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> December 2022, in Sharjah UAE. Furthermore, with the ongoing conflict in the Sudan, it also participated in ICCROM'S FAR Programme for Helping Sudan's National Crisis Response and Risk Management in Cairo, Egypt from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> June 2023.

*Arba'in* or 'Forty-Days Road' which ran from Asyut in Upper Egypt to Kobbei in North Darfur (see further Asher 1986; el-Bushra 1971, 65; Jesse *et al.* 2015; Riemer and Förster 2013).<sup>3</sup> From early in the twentieth century various attempts were made to document, categorise, explain and interpret Darfur's complicated history, archaeology, rock art, various cultural groups, anthropology, and languages (i.e., Arkell 1936; 1951; 1952; 1959; 1961; Balfour-Paul 1955; Henderson 1933; Hillelson 1925; Junker 1921; Newbold 1924; MacMichael 1919; Seligman 1913; Willis 1918). Much early work, though not all, was carried out by colonial administrators in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, with their reports appearing in the journal *Sudan Notes and Records*, and some reflect the prevalent ideas of the time or theories that have now been revised or discredited. More recent studies include for example, those of Greenberg (1970) and Obenga (1981) on languages, MacGaffey (1966) and Tubiana (1964) concerning cultural groups, O'Fahey and Spaulding (1974), O'Fahey (1980; 2008) and O'Fahey and Abu Salim (1983) addressing history and society, and McGregor (2001) examining archaeology and history. Nevertheless, relatively little attention had been paid to this rich cultural region until Nyala University was established.

### The Centre for Darfur Heritage

The University of Nyala is a government institution. It was established in 1994 after separating from Al Fasher University which had been founded in the town of al-Fasher in North Darfur. The first decree establishing Al Fasher University was issued in 1975 under the name of the University of Darfur, though the institution was only inaugurated in 1983. It was renamed '*al-Fatih min September*' University (University of the Dawn of September) in 1990. The Al Fasher University branch college of Veterinary Science, established in Nyala at that time, constituted the base for the newly born Nyala University in South Darfur.

The Centre for Darfur Heritage, a collaborative, multidisciplinary hub, was established in Nyala University in 2013 with the goal of conducting cultural heritage research and to work with community partners to address Darfur's critical needs via this field of study. Its aim and vision are to help in managing cultural diversity. A major objective is to bridge the widening gap between Sudan's geographic centre and its periphery, an acknowledged issue of national identity noted in various peace agreements signed in Sudan over the past years. It is an investment in education, research, and training in human cultural development so that the outcomes of such development can better impact on economic growth. The Centre's basic principle is to enhance cultural diversity in Darfur in its relationships, within the bigger picture of Sudan.

The Centre coordinates and promotes activities aimed at instigated top-level research programmes in cultural heritage and linguistics to promote local and global awareness. It coordinates and facilitates collaboration among partner faculties, institutions and scholars conducting cultural heritage research in fields such as history, archaeology, linguistics, cultural geography, anthropology, museum studies, art, material culture, tourism studies, Sudan culture and education. It also helps in tackling the intricacies and mysterious aspects of international conventions concerning safeguarding cultural heritage in conflict zones to enhance, respond and contribute to the various challenges of safeguarding and valorising cultural heritage. It supports research through grant writing and administration, and through festival, symposium, and conference planning. Knowledge creation and the utilisation of cultural and creative industries form

<sup>3</sup> The *Darb el Arba'in* or Forty Days' Road from Assiut in Egypt, passed through to Jebel Ramli (3 days), Kharga [Kharga Oasis] (1 day), Bulak (1 day), Beiris [Baris] (1 day), Esh Shab [Bir el-Sheb] (5 days), Selima [Selima Oasis] (4 days), Laqiya [Laqiya Arba'in] (5 days), Bir el Milh [Bir el-Malha] (8 days), Mazrub (11 days), to Kubbe [Kobbei/ Kabayh] the merchant's depot (5 days). Thence the road divided, the western branch going to Abéché (8 days), and the eastern through Fada (5 days) and Umm Geras [Umm Jarass] (6 days) to Darfur' (Lampen 1950, 178).



the pillars for growth and development. The goal is to become a world-class cultural heritage research institute by communicating the value of cultural heritage through exchanges between academia and the local community in order to advance mutual understanding and contribute to sustainable cultural development. Research that creates new intercultural engagements, explores potential approaches in the field of heritage, and develops new tools, strategies and resources for the study and stewardship of culture is focused upon. Research is conducted through community participation – working collaboratively with community partners to address relevant research questions and to develop programmes, tools, and other products that meet their needs. The outcome may be used in education – promoting public awareness of cultural heritage while fostering dialogue in times of climate change and conflict.

The Centre has five departments. Each is responsible for conducting research on various elements of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. These are as follows:

### **Indigenous languages**

This department is responsible for the documentation and safeguarding of Darfur's indigenous languages consisting of about twelve languages, which include Bidiyat, Daju, Fur, Masalit, Midob, Tama and Beria (Zaghawa).<sup>4</sup> The current distribution of these languages is to the west, south, and east of the Wadi Howar area (which might suggest an original diaspora may have come from this zone (Dimmendaal 2007, 148)).<sup>5</sup>

### **Archaeology**

This was the first department established in the Darfur region intended to conduct research, and coordinate with partners, to carry out archaeological excavations of Darfur's civilisations. Eventually, this department is also intended to develop theory and practice in preservation, conservation, and restoration techniques to help in ensuring resilience and cultural continuity for future generations. The department also seeks to critically revisit conflicting ideas and to re-evaluate their impact on historiography.

One such example is the re-examination of old evidence and the incorporation of recent discoveries concerning occupation during the Palaeolithic. It had been thought there was evidence for Palaeolithic occupation in the Wadi Howar north of Jebel Marra, but none in regions to its south (Balfour-Paul 1955, 3-4). Occupation south of Jebel Marra, between Nyertete and Kalokitting was found later (c. 1967), as suggested by the discovery of a possible Late Palaeolithic flake and chopper industry (Wickens 1970, 147).

Another concerns the idea that the early Daju kingdom (12<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries) was perhaps in some way connected with ancient Egypt, because the Forty-Days caravan route linked Kobbei, Darfur and Asyut in Upper Egypt, thus potentially enabling the exchange of cultural heritage (Arkeell 1959, 44; 1961, 107, 176; *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1993, 885), and/or with the Kingdom of Kush. These assertions are highly questionable (McGregor 2001, 25) and 'what many of these theories have had in common is an unwillingness on the part of their proponents to believe that the massive stone ruins of the Darfur mountains could actually be the work of an indigenous culture' (McGregor 2011, 130).<sup>6</sup>

A third issue is the attribution of the various stone structures in Darfur. The earliest (pre-12<sup>th</sup> century) are thought to have been built by the Tora, a mythical/legendary race of 'white giants'. The Tora are mentioned by Arkeell as 'To Ra' (1951, 38, 52).

<sup>4</sup> See further 2019, 'Documentation of Darfur Indigenous Languages' [<https://en.iyil2019.org/events/documentation-of-darfur-indigenous-languages/#:~:text=Its%20a%20great%20opportunity%20to,%2C%20Eringa%2C%20Mileri%20and%20Singar>].

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of language groups, classifications, and linguistic evidence for the spread of various languages see Bender 1997; Greenberg 1963; MacGaffey 1966; McGregor 2001, 22-26. Contra Arkeell 1955. Further some linguists have considered that Meroitic may be an Eastern Sudanic language (Trigger 1966, 23), however, recent research further examining the linguistic position of Meroitic has cast doubt on this idea (Rilly 2010, 409-410).

<sup>6</sup> See McGregor 2001, 24-26 for a discussion concerning the origins of the Daju.

‘Three dynasties are known to have emerged from the original Tora population, whoever they might have been. Traditionally all three arose from inter-marriage with immigrants and apparently without bloodshed. These dynasties were those of Daju, Tunjur, and Keira/Fur, and all three appear to have adopted the ancient Tora technique of dry-stone walling. The uniformity of construction of these massive rubble-filled walls is such that it is now extremely difficult to ascribe with any certainty a particular building to a particular dynasty. By tradition those buildings to the south and east of Jebel Marra belong to the Daju, various others to the north and north-west to the Tunjur, while the Tora palaces in the Turra Hills described by Arkell (1937) are attributed to the early Keira kings’ (Wickens 1970, 147).<sup>7</sup>

Folklore identifies the immigrants who gave rise to these dynasties as ‘Wise Strangers’. More recent analysis has differentiated some of the variety of styles and characteristics of Tora construction used by each dynasty (McGregor 2011, 131-133).

### **Museums**

This department develops research plans and policies to promote both government-run and private indigenous museums of the Darfur region. A small academic museum was established at the Musei Campus of Nyala University to assist in connecting cultural heritage with higher education. Its collections comprise tangible and intangible objects. In addition to donations received from the local communities, most items were collected during the implementation of the Western Sudan Community Museums Project (see Mallinson *et al.* 2020).

### **Traditional knowledge**

The traditional knowledge department conducts research on know-how in intangible practices, skills, and crafts, and on knowledge transfer of food and beverages. It documents herbal medical and indigenous pathology, and agricultural and domestic farming practices. This ecological, as well as biodiversity-related, knowledge can be developed, sustained, and passed on from generation to generation within the Darfur community, and often forms part of its cultural or spiritual identity. The department is also concerned with research on privacy, ethics, and intellectual property challenges relevant to traditional cultural products and animal brands.

### **Records and archives**

This department manages old photographic evidence, maps, manuscripts, government records and archives of Darfur region. It has built a library and a considerable digital archive collection of pre- and post-colonial correspondence, rare historical books, manuscripts, maps, and old photographs. It also deals with studies on documentation, digitisation and promotes access to the collection.

### **Contributions**

The Centre for Darfur Heritage continues to contribute to cultural human development in the Darfur region. A cultural heritage curriculum programme has been drafted and submitted to the University of Nyala Council for approval to be implemented by 2024 at the undergraduate level. Practical aspects of the curriculum include fieldwork surveys and laboratory activities as part of the accredited teaching credit hours. Scholarships and fellowships are also guaranteed to enable different groups of local and foreign students to join the programme. The Centre has assisted in the implementation of collaborative projects including the following:

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<sup>7</sup>The approximate dating of the various Darfur dynasties are as follows: Daju 12<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century; Tunjur 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century; Fur early 17<sup>th</sup> century-1916. For a description of each dynasty and their characteristics see McGregor 2011, 130-134.

### **Digitalisation of the Darfur Archives**

This project was funded by the British Council and Aliph Foundation and implemented by the Sudan Memory Project in collaboration with King's College, London in partnership with the Centre for Darfur Heritage Research at University of Al Fasher in Sudan (6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> April 2021).

### **Darfur's handcrafts survey**

This is an unprecedented project aimed at the documentation of handcrafts in the Darfur markets. It covers the skills of practitioners in the capitals of the five federal Darfur States including Nyala, Zalingei, Geneina, al-Fasher and al-Daein.

A survey training workshop was organised by the Centre for Darfur Heritage at University of Nyala in collaboration with Institute for African and Asian Studies, University of Khartoum, under patronage of the NCAM Sudan. It was supervised by the ICCROM and funded by the British Council. It was held at the Legislative Council's Convention Hall, Nyala (26<sup>th</sup> October-1<sup>st</sup> November 2020).

### **Cultural heritage and climate change survey**

Drastic climate change took place during the Holocene period which led to a mass exodus of population from the Yellow Nile (Wadi Howar) southwest into Darfur. 'Today the number of permanently inhabited villages in Darfur drops sharply north of 14°30' N latitude i.e., north of a line drawn between the cities of Mellit and Kutum, where the mean precipitation drops below 250mm per year (Dumont and el Moghraby 1993, 381).

This survey is conducted in collaboration with key players including University of Al Fasher and the NCAM, with the assistance of local guides from the Native Administration chiefs. A National Archaeological Expedition Team has been formally established with the target of mapping and surveying Darfur's archaeological sites. Darfur needs a comprehensive and integrated survey of tangible and intangible heritage and a climate change impact analysis. Sites surveyed include the following:

#### **Old Shoba (Figures 1 and 2)**

This site is located near Kabkabiya, west of al-Fasher. It is associated with Sultan Mohamed Teirab of the Keira dynasty (AD 1752-1787). It consists of his palace and mosque, in addition to his mother's house, fort, and associated settlements (Balfour-Paul 1955, 24). It was surveyed by University of Nyala and the NCAM team before the constitution of the National Archaeological Expedition Team mentioned above.

#### **Jebel Uri (Figures 3-9)**

This site is located northwest of the Shoba palaces and west of Ain Farah in the Furnung hills. It sits on the western frontier of the Forty-Days Road at the crossroads with other old caravan routes to Tripoli and Timbuktu (Sweeney 1973, 178). It includes a royal palace of the Tunjur Sultan Shaw Dorshid [Shau Dorsid], a residential compound of circular stone huts, the ruined city of Jebel Uri, the nine-stepped audience chamber of the royal palace and associated cemeteries (Davidson 1959, 15, 105, 107). Uri one of the great inland civilisations. Its ruins are considered amongst the most important remains of an old city compound in Darfur.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Ain Farah (Figures 10 and 11)**

This site is located northwest of Kutum and c. 32km south of Uri. It includes a royal mosque built of red brick, (which Arkell mistakenly suggested was a Christian monastery (1959, 44)), guard towers, a royal palace of the Tunjur Sultan Shaw Dorshid, the sultan's mother's house, cemeteries, scattered potsherds, and a spring. The site also has the remains of brick kilns where the bricks used to construct the buildings

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<sup>8</sup> See further McGregor 2011, 133-134.





Figure 1. Teirab Palace at Shoba.



Figure 2. Teirab Palace at Shoba.





Figure 3. A 'rock hound' (hole) at Uri.



Figure 4. Swimming pool of Sultan Shaw Dorshid at Ain Farah between Jebel Ain and Jebel Sultan.





Figure 5. Red brick columns of the mosque of Sultan Shaw Dorshid, Ain Farah.



Figure 6. Tower for Sultan Shaw Dorshid's royal guards, east of his mosque at Ain Farah.





Figure 7. Stone stairs leading to Sultan Shaw Dorshid's palace.



Figure 8. Stone ruins of a guard tower southwest of Sultan Shaw Dorshid's mosque.





Figure 9. Western stone wall of the mosque at Ain Farah.



Figure 10. Oval stone cemetery at Jebel Uri.





Figure 11. ‘Baptistry in the monastery’ at Ain Farah.

on site were fired. When Arkell saw it, the kilns were ‘surrounded by impenetrable *kitir* bushes’ (*acacia mellifera*) (Arkell 1936, 301). Circular stone huts were found near a gateway within a rough defence wall built across the valley (Arkell 1936, 302).<sup>9</sup>

#### Tagabo Hills (Figures 12-15)

These are volcanic rocks of horse-shoe shape located northeast of al-Fasher and northwest of Mellit (14°41`N, 25°55`E). They are described as ‘basic, intermediate, alkaline basalt flows overlaying Nubian-type sandstones, and trachytic and phonolitic plugs and radiating trachytic dykes penetrating the sandstone and the basement gneisses’ (Babiker 1971, 15). ‘There are two or three holy stones and trees in or near the Tagabo Hills [at Sayah and Jebel Tagabo] ...The space around the tree or stone is carefully swept and sheep are sacrificed and offerings of meat, milk, fat and flour are made and ‘worship is rendered’ (MacMichael 1922, 65). The Western Sudan Community Museum’s (WSCM) survey documented a rock pyramid at Jebel Mabu, the cave of King Nyamudu, old stone-built wells, ruins of circular stone huts and fragments of potsherds. Rock art inside the cave of Jebel Bong Bong, outside the Tagabo Hills range (Figure 16), was photographed for the first time. The ruins of Abu Nashab, three hours north of Tagabo Hills, were also surveyed and old wells, rock engravings of animal brands, cemeteries and a cave were explored (WSCM Project).

#### King Idris Palace

This site is located southwest of Sayah town near Wadi Sayah. Rock games, stone huts, a stone enclosure, and rock art inside a cave were explored. This site was discovered for the first time by the National Expedition Team (WSCM Project).

#### Jebel Meidob (Figures 17-26)

This site consists of a distinct volcanic mountain in the north-eastern region of Darfur (Gertell *et al.* 2014,

<sup>9</sup> To follow the development and subsequent revisions of Arkell’s theories regarding Ain Farah see Arkell 1936; 1959. For early drawings of the site and further discussion of Arkell’s theories see McGregor 2011, 134-136.





Figure 12. Namodo Palace at Tagabo Hills.



Figure 13. Stone hut circle at Jebel Namodo.





Figure 14. Ruin of pyramid (?) at Jebel Mabu within the Tagabo Hills.



Figure 15. King Namodo's cave at Tagabo Hills with rock art inside its walls in North Darfur.





Figure 16. Bong Bong cave at Tagabo Hills.

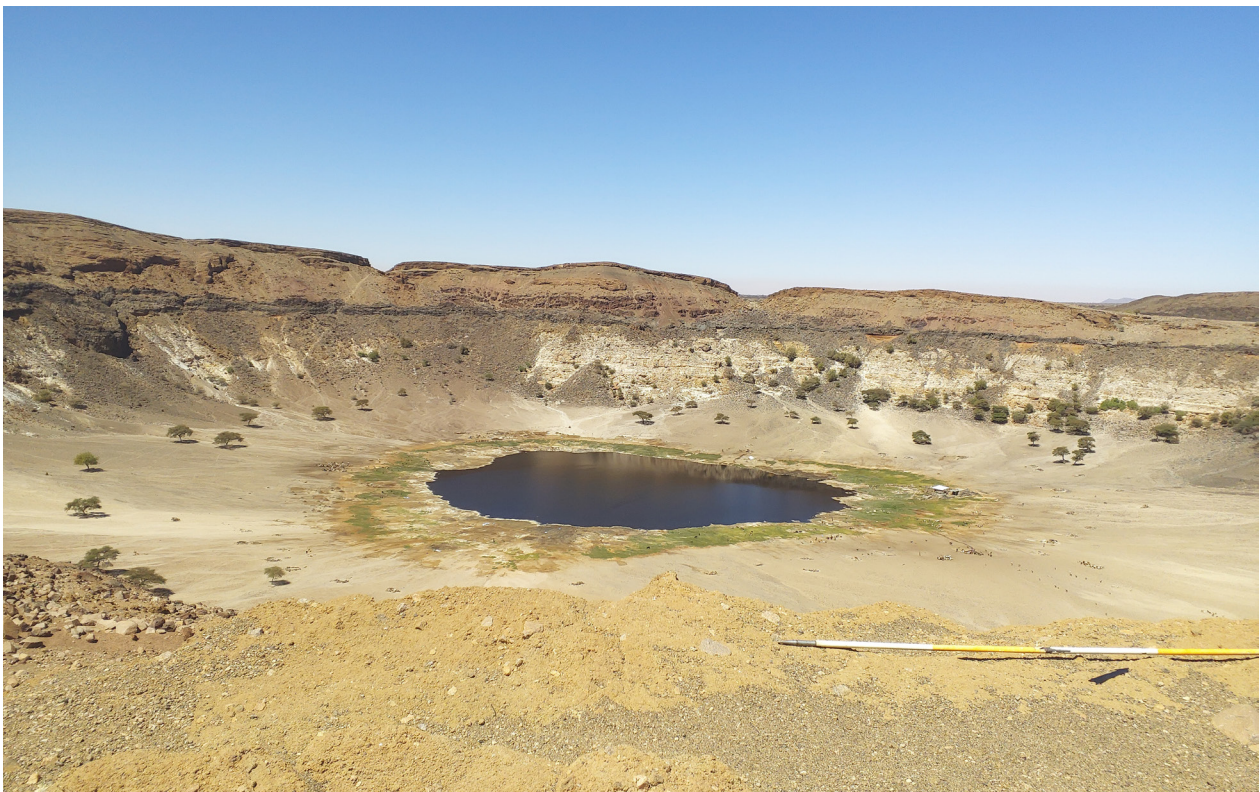


Figure 17. Malha volcano crater with saltwater pool in North Darfur.



104). It has a sediment bed from the crater lake of Malha and has saline and permanent water as well as freshwater springs. Two major cities and tumuli graves were located. ‘The largest city is situated at Malha hidden within the lava field of Jebel Sodur. It composed of peripheral fortifications, graves and small number of adjacent huts’ (Dumont and el Moghraby 1993, 385, 394).

#### Hadjar Nyala (Figures 27-29)

This is an old well monument and archaeological site located in the midst of the Bank Complex in the downtown Nyala market. According to myth, it was a market and rest space for the search team who followed traces of King Omar Kissinfurogé’s route westwards. They sat chatting there before resuming their search for the king’s scattered body parts (see further Macintosh 1931, 172-173). Accordingly, two wells were dug near a hill, and both were named ‘nyala’ meaning ‘place of chatting’ in the Daju language (Macintosh 1931, 174). In the 1960s and 1970s, the hill rocks were consumed as building material to construct the commercial banks adjacent to the site. This left a vacant space as a memorial open space, but it was later sold as an investment project to establish the Gulf Bank. In 2019, local indigenous leaders revolted and stopped the illicit appropriation of the site. They often exhibit their own museum of wonderful objects on this site to the general public (i.e., WSCM, see Mallinson *et al.* 2020).

#### Prospective survey projects

Many archaeological sites in Darfur await field surveys including the ruins of Jebel Marra, the Daju mountains, including the renowned Jebel Um Kardos of the antelope and the king’s legend, Wadi Howar, old Kobbei town, Kafia Kingi (copper mine), the stone cities of Mao and settlements of Jebel Wara at Jebel Simiat east of al-Fasher, and Kerker (Seringeti) at Jebel Meidob in North Darfur. Many old baobab trees as well as local manuscripts and old photographs also need to be safeguarded and protected.

#### Conclusion

The Archaeological Department at the Centre for Darfur Heritage at Nyala University is to revisit and



Figure 18. Well on top of the Malha crater pool.





Figure 19. Salt manufacture at the Malha crater.



Figure 20. Traces of illicit mining southeast of the Malha crater.





Figure 21. Stone wall at Jebel Dad near Malha.



Figure 22. Illicit mining damage to tombs at Jebel Dad.



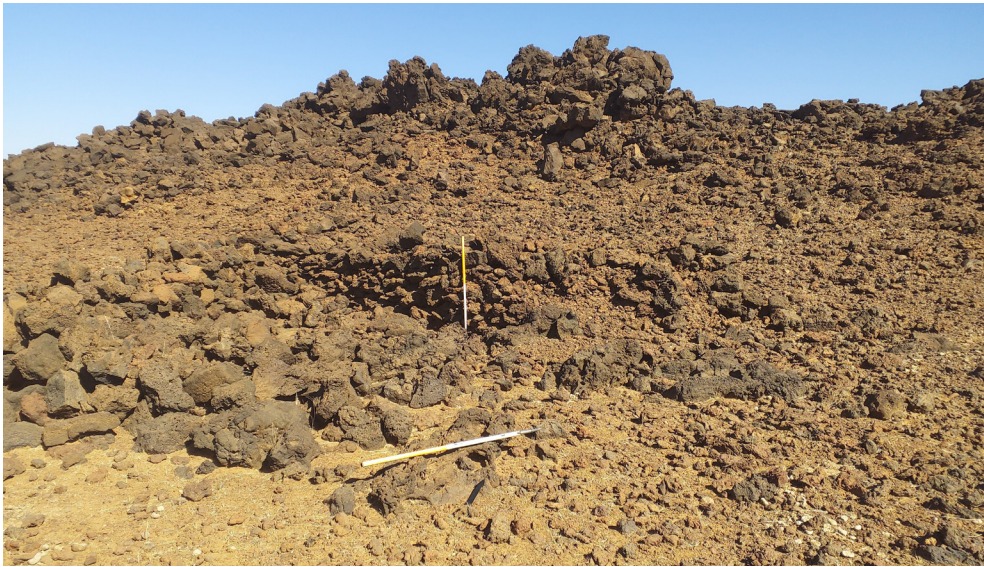


Figure 23. Ruins of stone wall in Old Town of Malha.



Figure 24. Potsherds in Old Town of Malha.



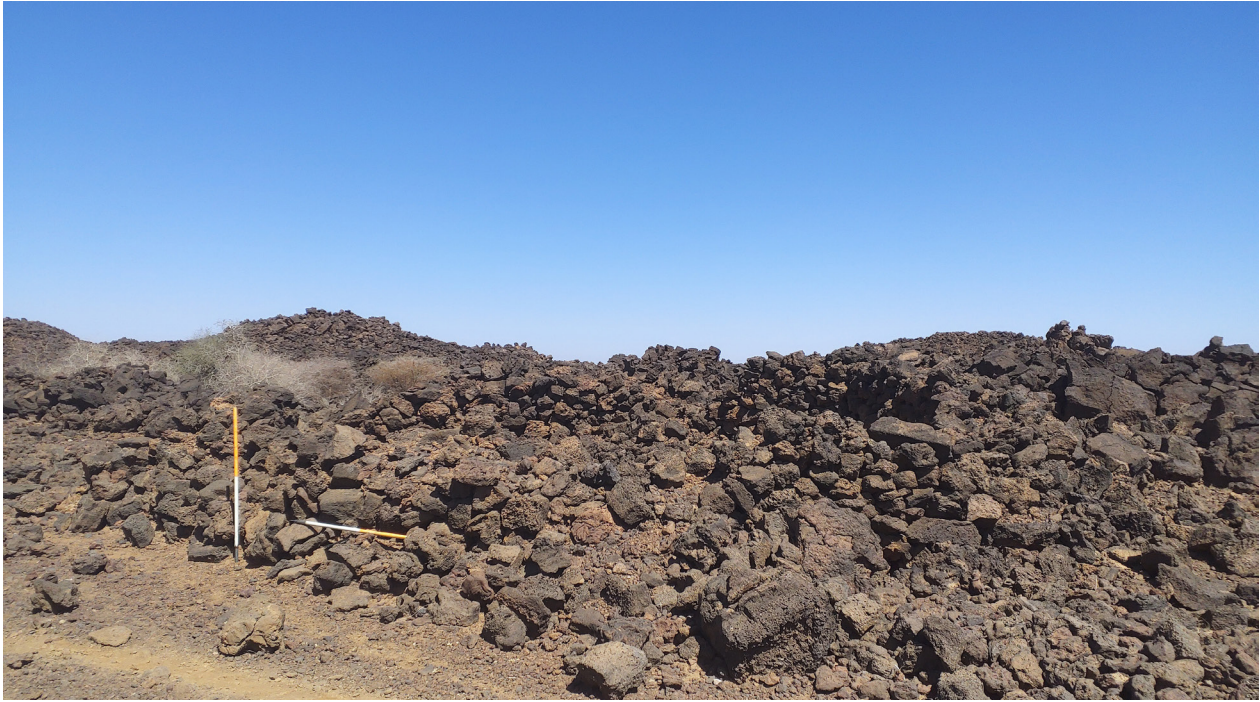
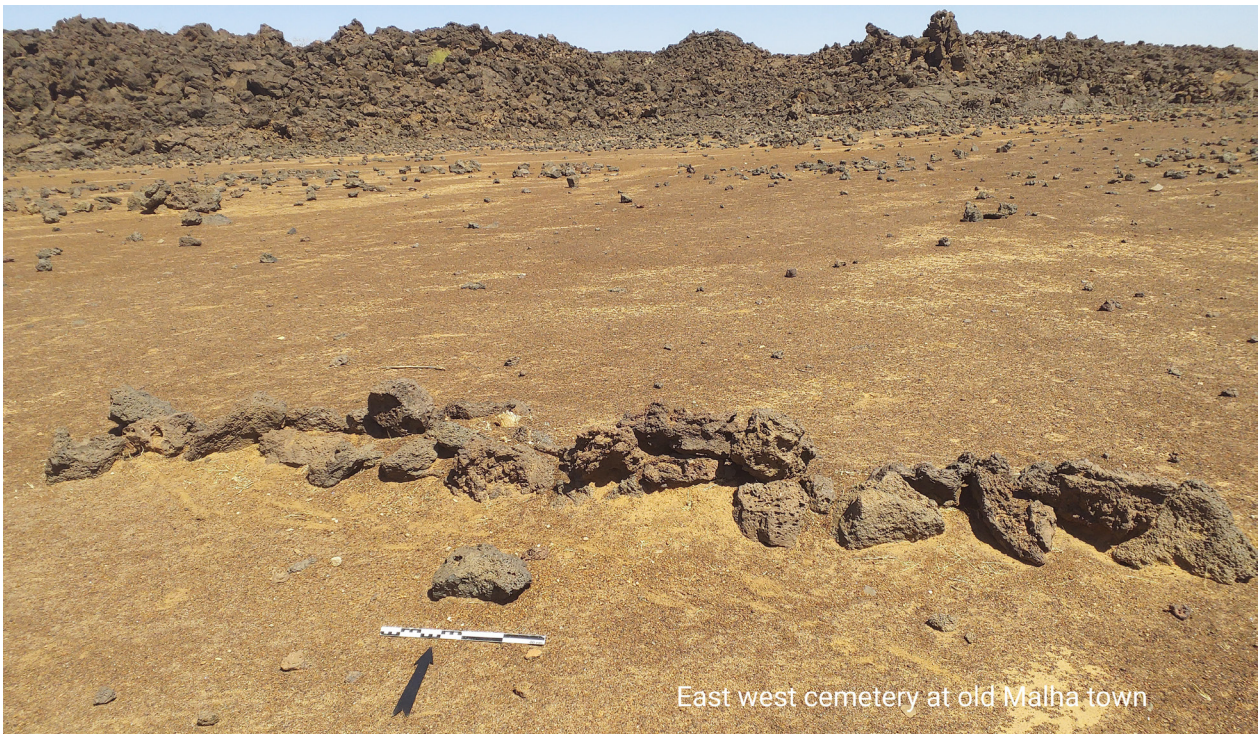


Figure 25. Two towers east of the Old Town of Malha gate.



East west cemetery at old Malha town

Figure 26. Old Town of Malha cemetery. The cemetery is orientated east-west.





Figure 27. Hadjar Nyala well in Nyala's main market, South Darfur. This is where the name Nyala (Daju language) meaning 'Place of chatting, theatre and knife sharpening' originated.



Figures 28 and 29. Close up of the Hadjar Nyala well.

coordinate efforts to investigate the position of Darfur as a south-western cultural corridor to ancient Egypt, Nubia, the Mediterranean and the African Sahel. This, for example, may further inform the hypothesis attributing the establishment of the stone cities of Meidob and Tagabo Hills to the middle Holocene and the origins of the Tora culture of Jebel Mara (see further Dumont and el Moghraby 1993).

This study further recommends and notes an urgent need to develop an initiative to establish a Sahel Digital Memory to safeguard archives and manuscripts of the scattered political correspondence of various precolonial polities and kingdoms of this part of the hemisphere.

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