

SUDAN & NUBIA

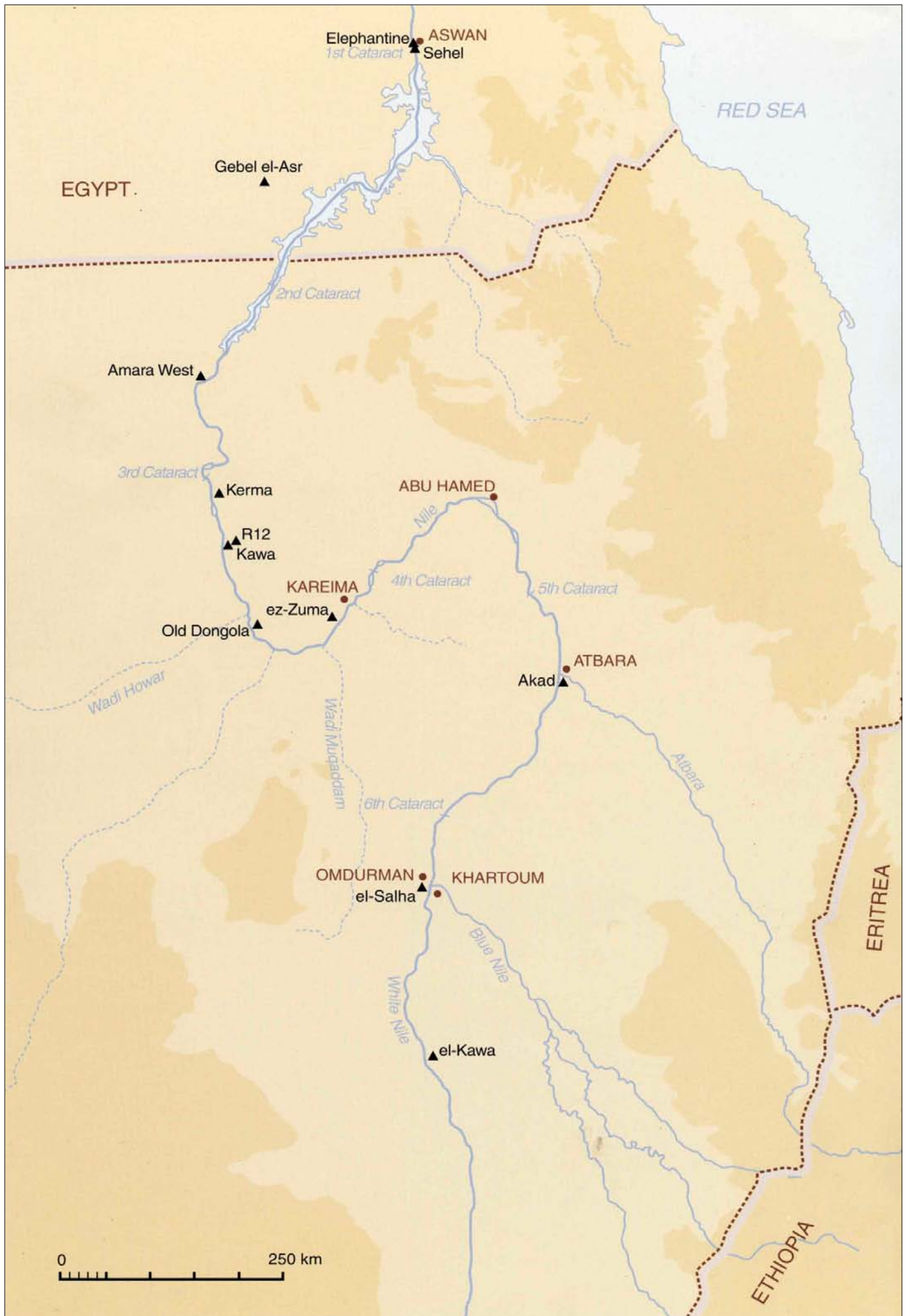
The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



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Front Cover: An apostle from the mural in the chapel at Baganarti containing the king's portrait.

Introduction

Vivian Davies

At the time of writing (mid-September 2002), the 10th International Conference for Nubian Studies has just finished, generously hosted by colleagues in the Università di Roma "La Sapienza". The large number of papers delivered shows how rapidly the subject of Middle Nile studies is growing, with significant advances in knowledge achieved since the last conference held in Boston four years ago, an encouraging state of affairs, to which the content of this present volume bears further witness. There was, however, one hugely important issue which overshadowed the event: the looming crisis of the new dam at the Fourth Cataract.

As reported by the Sudanese delegation, preparatory work for the dam has now begun and actual building will start in two years. It is expected to take a further seven years to complete. In an unwelcome echo of the Aswan High Dam scheme, the reservoir created will flood over 170km of the Nile Valley between the Fourth Cataract and Abu Hamed, enveloping, as we now know from preliminary surveys, thousands of archaeological sites - artefact scatters, settlements, cemeteries and rock-drawings dating from the Palaeolithic to the Islamic Periods. Very little is known about these sites; for the most part only that they exist. Our Sudanese colleagues are urgently appealing for assistance, so that as much as possible of the record may be investigated and documented before the area is lost to knowledge for ever. In response, SARS is this winter launching a campaign of rescue excavation in a region which we recently surveyed (see *Sudan & Nubia* 4 [2000], 51-7), but an extensive international effort will be required if any serious impact is to be made. Our next international colloquium, to be held at the British Museum on 8 May 2003, will focus on the dam emergency. All colleagues with an interest in helping are invited to attend.

The Is.I.A.O. el-Salha Archaeological Project

Donatella Usai and Sandro Salvatori

The Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente el-Salha Project began in November 2000 and the second field season was carried out between November and December 2001. The Project is supported by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, sponsored by the Italian company GASID, and, for the second campaign, received a grant from the Michela Schiff Giorgini Foundation.¹

The survey area is located south of Omdurman and extends from the left bank of the White Nile for about 35 km to the west, as far as Jebel Baroka (Figure 1). The project, named after the most important village of the area along the Nile, is designed to record systematically the archaeological evidence present in the area and collect data that may help in the investigation of the relationship between the environment, culture and human activity during the different cultural phases.

as with many other regions in Sudan, the area south-west of Omdurman was previously little explored archaeologically.

Safeguarding the archaeological remains in the area is a major aim of the project, considering that the rapid rate of urban expansion around the capital of Sudan, Khartoum, in particular the south-western extension of Omdurman, is threatening to destroy them forever. There is also the hope of discovering traces of the ancient inhabitants of the area, preceding the emergence of Early Holocene, Mesolithic, hunter-fisher-gatherers. We know that along the Nile Valley, upstream of the Fourth Cataract, there were human groups during the Late Pleistocene, between 40,000 and 10,000 years bp, but we have no indication of contemporary groups in Central Sudan. We have, on the other hand, enough data to follow the evolution of human groups from a Mesolithic predatory subsistence economy to a Neolithic productive one based on livestock herding and possibly agriculture and a more or less stratified social structure, as suggested by the cemeteries excavated to the north of Khartoum and in Upper Nubia (esh-Shaheinab, el-Ghaba, Kadero, el-Kadada, Kadruka).

When we reach the dawn of the 3rd millennium BC our knowledge of the events in this area is rather scanty until the

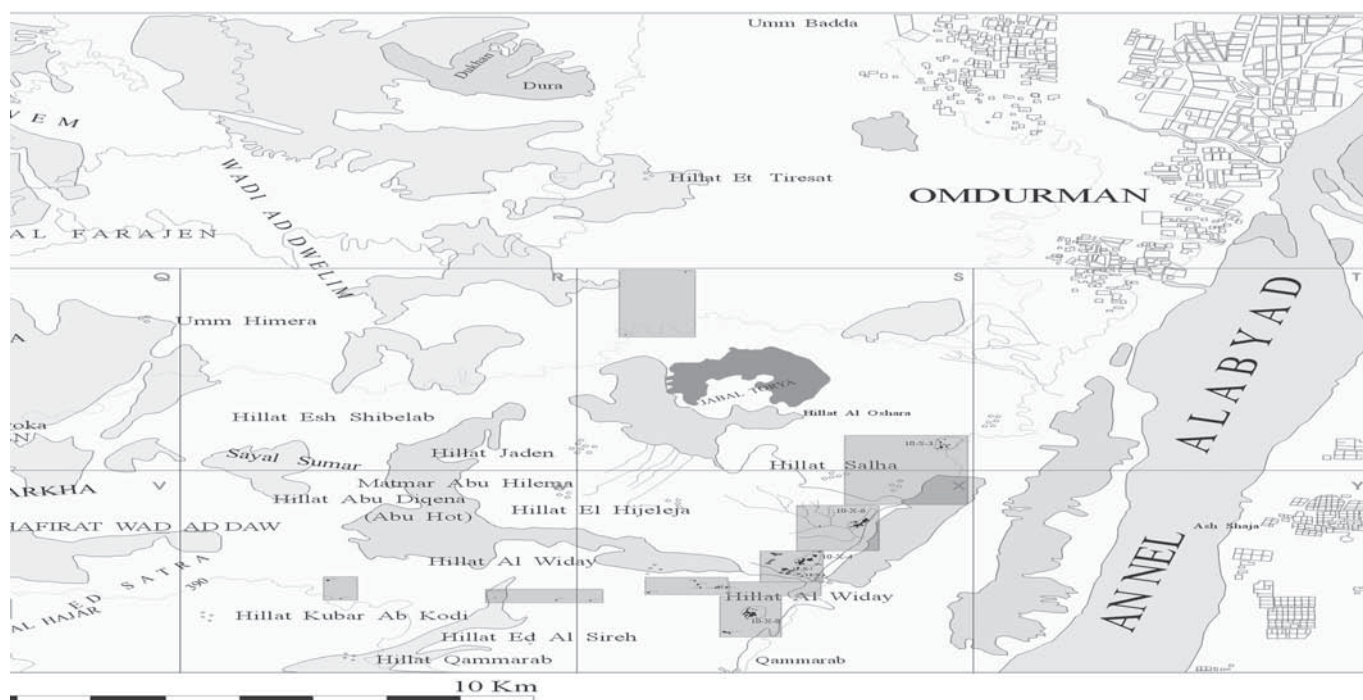


Figure 1. Map of the Is.I.A.O. concession.

A decisive factor in the choice of the area was the awareness of the important role played by Central Sudan in the development of the Late Pleistocene and, mainly, Early Holocene ancient societies in the Nile Valley. Furthermore,

¹ We would like here to thank the Michela Schiff Giorgini Foundation for the grant given to the Project. Thanks to the additional funds provided by the Foundation we were able to achieve important results and bring the planned work to a successful conclusion.

rise of the Kushite Kingdom and the medieval Kingdom of Alwa, of which Soba, some 22 km south-east of the Blue and White Nile confluence, was the capital.

Our survey work has been organised in such a way as to allow, even without a total coverage, an evaluation of the potential of the area. We distributed our work in a series of 2 x 1 km transects, walking in a comb-like pattern. This intensive and systematic strategy resulted in the location of



many prehistoric sites whose preservation is often affected by water-wind erosion and may survive only as ephemeral pottery and lithic concentrations. Transects were, furthermore, organized in such a way as to cover different geomorphological entities recognisable from aerial photographs to make it possible to evaluate the probable relationship between them and the distribution of archaeological evidence.

More than one hundred sites have been recorded so far, covering a chronological span from the Palaeolithic to Post-Meroitic periods. The oldest archaeological evidence, dating to the Late Pleistocene, Middle and Late Palaeolithic, was located close to Jebel Baroka, whereas those dating to the Early and Middle Holocene, Early Khartoum Mesolithic, Early and Late Neolithic, were found either near the jebel or along the western Nile bank. Later sites, Meroitic and Post-Meroitic, appear distributed all along the strip of land that we surveyed.

Two large cemeteries, 10-U-3 and 10-U-21, of cairns made from black Nubian sandstone, were mapped with the aid of a Laser Theodolite, provided by Leica Geosystem of Milan. Of these two cemeteries, one (10-U-21, Figure 2) was undoubtedly of the Post-Meroitic period, while the dating of the other is still uncertain.

Cemetery 10-U-3 contains two different types of cairns, the minority made from black Nubian sandstone, and the majority made from white sandstone. The cairns of the former type were more carefully made and were round in shape. In one case, a sort of internal box, made also from black sandstone slabs set on their sides, was noted. The whitish sandstone cairns were much more roughly constructed

from flaked pieces of stone piled up. They varied in shape from circular to oval. The dimensions, in both cases, ranged from 1m to 11m in diameter, with 65% being between 0.96m and 2.96m in size.

Site 10-U-3 was built on top of a natural mound 2-3m in height, adjacent to which, in the plain, were numerous, clearly visible, stone structures. Here fragments of pottery of different periods, from Neolithic to Christian, were collected.

The other cemetery, 10-U-21, had well-preserved cairns of a type already known in other regions of the country (Amri-Kirbekan and Jebel Kulgeili; Welsby 2000, Mohammed Ali and Hussein 1999). They have an oval shape and a modest elevation and have been dated to the Post-Meroitic period.

Also certainly of Post-Meroitic date are the earthen tumuli of which several isolated and grouped examples were found. These tumuli were made of very small gravel (medium size 1cm) and earth. They were found generally in groups of five to ten and had a diameter, at the base, of more than 12m, the largest measuring as much as 20m. A tumulus of this type, located close to the Nile at el-Ushara village, had been excavated in 1953 (Marshall and Adam 1953).

Normally, stone-built cairns were absent in the area near the Nile bank, but there are reasons to think that many of them were destroyed and the stones re-used for houses constructed in the last fifty years. At el-Ushara the remains of one of these tumuli were identified and from it came a reddish, 'tear-drop'-shaped, carnelian pendant.

Evidence of Meroitic period structures and pottery was found at two sites, 10-X-5 and 10-X-8, located close to the Nile. Site 10-X-5 was a low mound which shows, in a naturally exposed section, a sequence of habitation deposits with burnt layers and mud-brick structures. Site 10-X-8 has been occupied since the Mesolithic period and produced fragments of Meroitic pottery (Plate 1).

The village of el-Ushara, highlighting the destruction of archaeological remains in this area, occupies the site of a Mesolithic and Early Neolithic settlement (10-S-4), as witnessed by the abundant fragments of pottery of these two periods collected here.

Among all of the located sites, those of the Early Holocene and Early Khartoum Mesolithic, are the most interesting. In

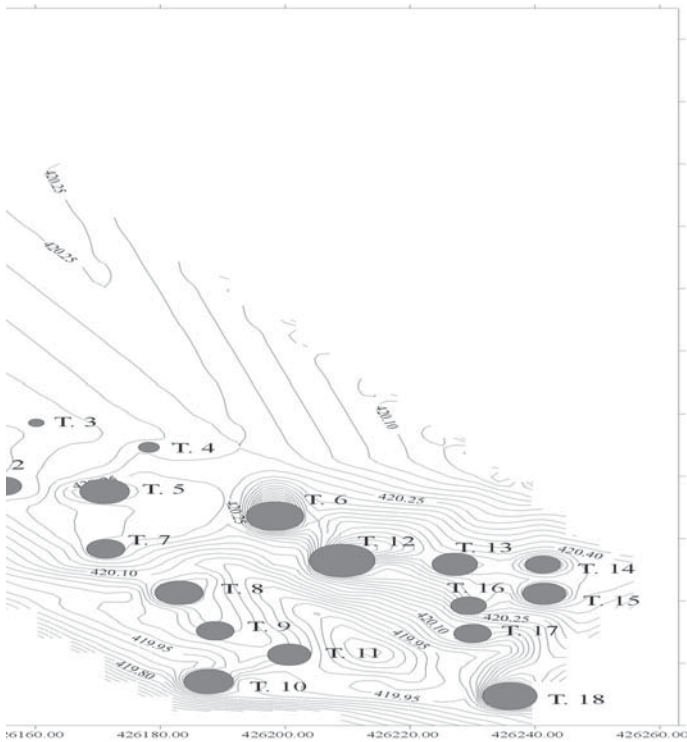


Figure 2. Map of cemetery at Site 10-U-21.



Plate 1. Meroitic pottery from the surface of Site 10-X-8.

two cases, 10-U-34 and 10-X-6, their dimensions average around ten hectares. Site 10-X-6 is a long mound (Figure 3) located at the margin of what seems to have been the earliest White Nile river bank and at the maximum limit of its actual flooding. On the surface of this site were traces, possibly of fireplaces, and other unidentifiable structures associated with animal-bone fragments, and areas of lithic workshops to pro-

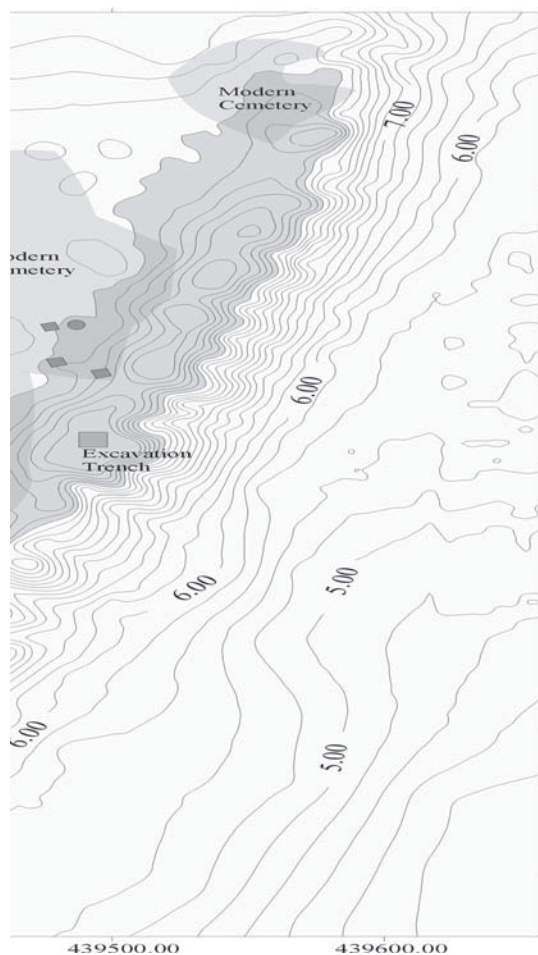


Figure 3. Site 10-X-6: topographic map.

duce tools for use in the daily life of the inhabitants. Among these, several fragments of bone harpoons, used for fishing (Figure 4), were collected. The most common lithic tools are scrapers and backed pieces, mainly lunates. The pottery is a rough ware, rich in quartzite inclusions and decorated with Wavy Line or Dotted Wavy Line motifs.

The other site, of the same period and with similar dimensions, 10-U-34, was located at the foot of Jebel Baroka. The pottery found on the surface of this site was only of Khartoum Mesolithic type and associated with grinding stones and sandstone rings (Figure 5).

Settlements of the succeeding Neolithic period, like 10-X-3 and 10-X-4, were found only along the Nile bank, while in the Jebel Baroka area only quartzite lithic workshops dating to this period were located (10-U-11A and B, 10-U-19), from which came whole pebbles, initially struck cores, flakes and finished artefacts.

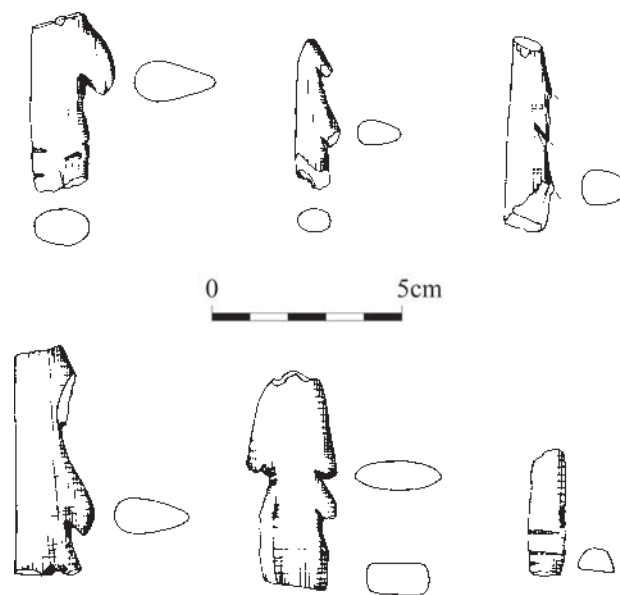


Figure 4. Bone harpoons from the surface collection at Site 10-X-6 (Scale 1:2).

In general, these lithic industries are characterised by microlithism and by the exclusive use of small quartzite pebbles covered with a thin yellowish patina, collected from a nearby gravelly area. The use of this raw material is a clear

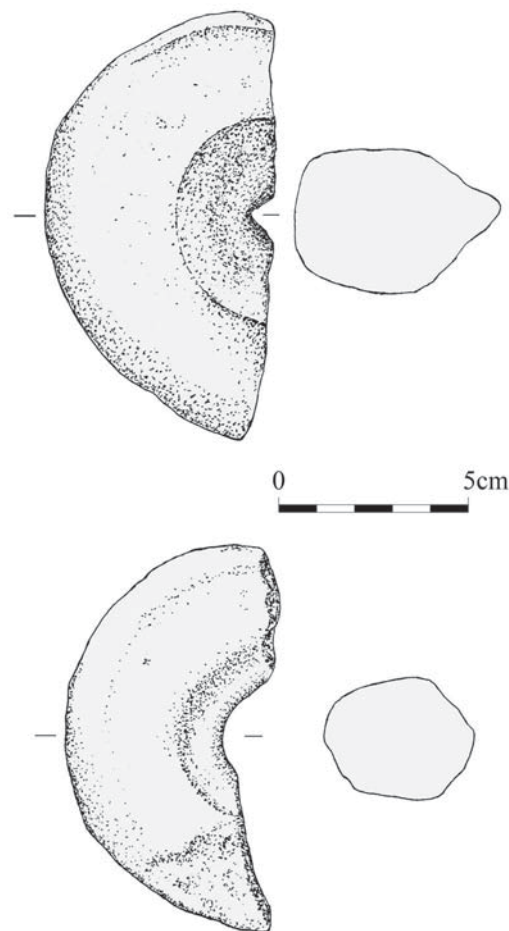


Figure 5. Stone rings from the Mesolithic Site 10-U-34 (Scale 1:2).



cultural choice as better quality raw material was noticed in the same gravel. The tools produced were mainly lunates and perforators typical of the Neolithic tradition. At these sites a collection was made in a systematic way, in areas of 8 x 4m, within 1m² grids, to allow careful study of the material distribution and to perform statistical analyses (Figure 6).

In one of these sites, 10-U-19, a tethering stone was found (Plate 2), as far as we know the first recorded in central Sudan. We have reasons to believe that settlements of the Neolithic period may have been covered by more recent alluvial sediments deposited by a now dried up palaeochannel.

The area of the jebel seems to be particularly interesting

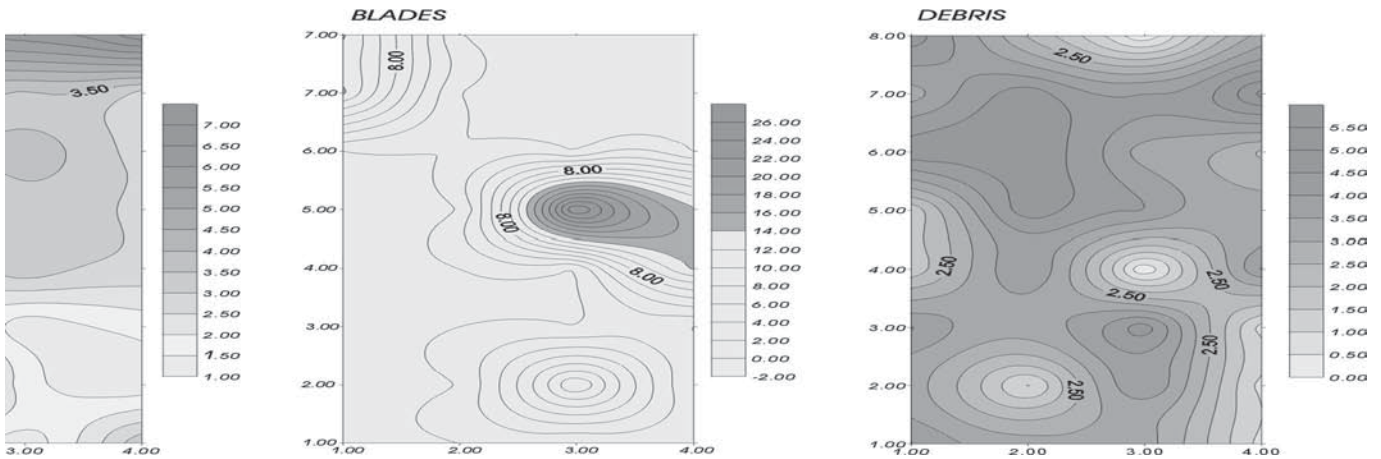


Figure 6. Distribution of quartz artefacts at Site 10-U-11A.

for Palaeolithic evidence. Here some hand axes made of black Nubian sandstone, cores and levallois flakes, of Middle Palaeolithic age, were found together with a possibly Late Palaeolithic pointed piece with bifacial retouch (10-U-25). During the 2001 survey on the first terraces of Jebel Baroka fine Palaeolithic sites were found dating to the Early Palaeolithic, Acheulean (Plate 3), and Early Middle Palaeolithic with Levalloisian pieces (Figure 7). The industries are reminiscent of the material found by Arkell (1949) at Khor Abu

Anga. The two most interesting sites of this type were located on top of the middle higher terrace of the jebel and on its south-western slope (Colour plate XXXVII).

Among the other sites located during the 2001 fieldwork in the jebel area we have to mention three more Early Khartoum sites. One appears completely eroded so that the material, especially the pottery, is very badly preserved. Among the lithics collected here were nice specimens of lunates and some backed blades. The other site had suffered considerably from erosion processes but it seems that there are some patches of original soil preserved here which may be worth excavating. The few fragments of pottery, where the original

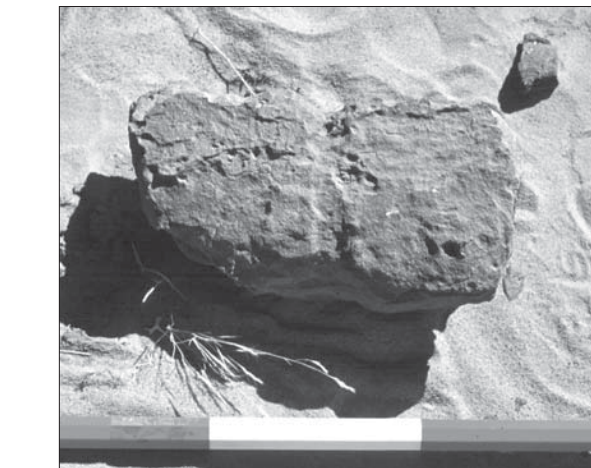


Plate 2. Tethering stone found close to the quartzite workshop, Site 10-U-19.

decoration was still visible, display a dotted pattern made by a rocker technique.

Another site of the same period had been located on top of the 400m a.s.l. terrace. It is enclosed within a natural basin and produced pottery, lithics, grinding stones (Plate 4) and almost fossilised animal bones. The archaeological

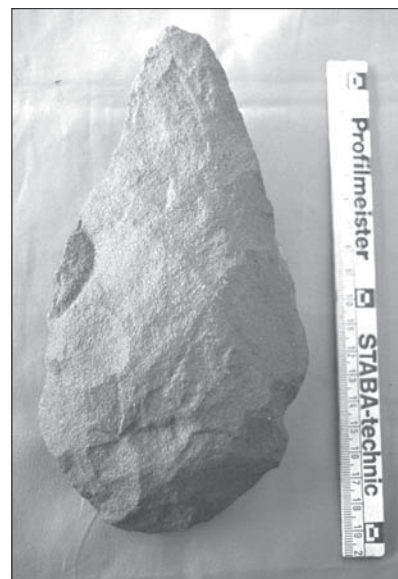


Plate 3. Stone hand-axe from the Early Palaeolithic Site 9-Y-17 at Jebel Baroka.

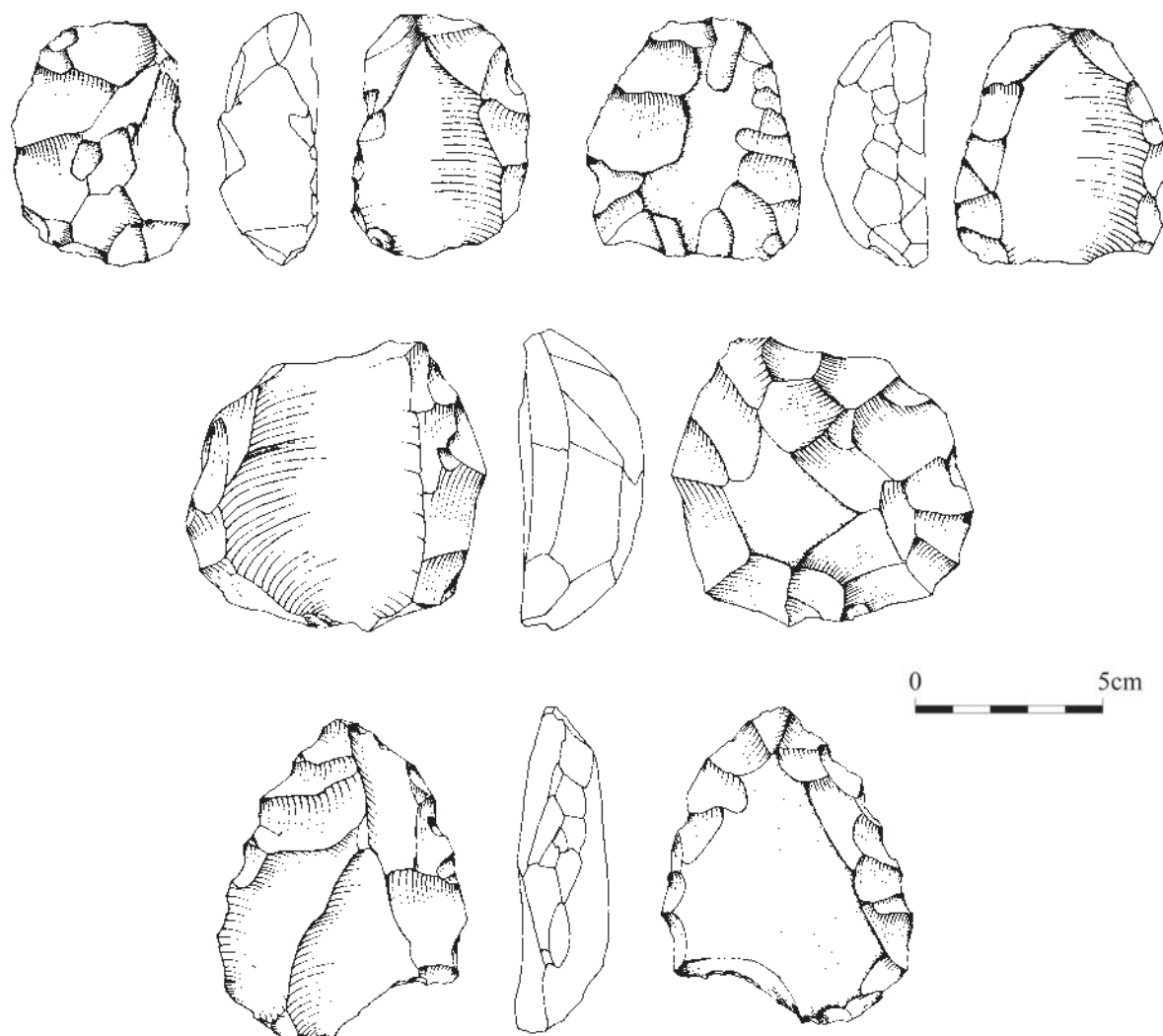


Figure 7. Levallois cores from the Jebel Baroka Middle Palaeolithic Site 9-Y-19a (Scale 1:2).

deposit has surely suffered from erosive processes but a surface cleaning in an area protected by huge boulders revealed remnants of anthropic soil. The decoration of the pottery is only rarely recognisable. In the few cases where it was visible it seems to have been a dotted pattern made by the rocker technique. The last three sites could be tentatively dated to a late horizon of the Early Khartoum Mesolithic period. An interesting site of much later date, possibly a Christian cemetery, lies at the foot of the jebel (Colour plate XXXVIII).

Some of the sites located during the first year of survey were prioritised for further investigation in the 2001 field campaign in view of the need to collect more archaeological and chronological information and because of the imminent risk of their destruction. Within the concession of the Is.I.A.O. project, the area close to the Nile river was the most endangered.

Site 10-X-6 is one of these sites. It is a very large site covering almost ten hectares, where Wavy Line and Dotted Wavy Line sherds were concentrated mostly on top of and around the graves of the modern Islamic cemetery, which is threatening to destroy it. An area of 4 x 10m was chosen on

top of the mound for the initial work on the site, a place where no sign of Muslim graves was visible on the surface. The excavation was conducted following a stratigraphic methodology within a grid of 1m². The soil was sieved to collect even the smallest archaeological remains.

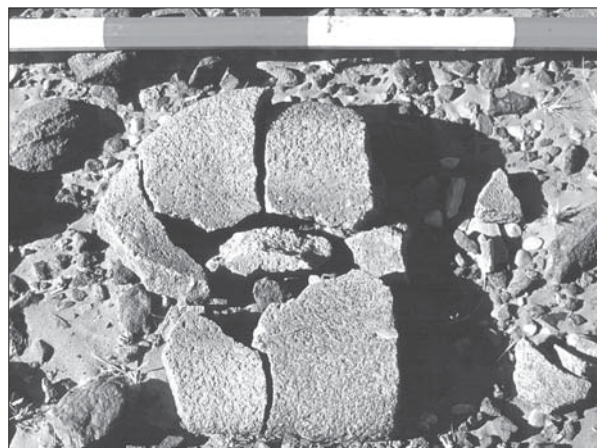


Plate 4. Grinding stone from the Mesolithic site 9-Y-18 on a Jebel Baroka terrace.



In the southern part of the north-south oriented trench, after the surface cleaning, an elliptical pit appeared cutting the subsurface layer. The pit contained a burial of unknown date, supposedly very Early Islamic, even if no evidence indicating such an age was present on the surface. The body was well-preserved and was oriented north-south with the head to the south, facing east.

The grave had no goods apart from the remains of a mat above the body and a wooden stick positioned along its length. The body was left in place in respect for Islamic law.

The archaeological deposits on the site were not so badly preserved, but have been extensively affected by human and animal disturbances, which have been responsible for a partial admixture of the archaeological material. A cup of possible Meroitic date was found in this deposit, which was not rich in archaeological material except for very small and very rounded fragments of pottery together with quartz flakes and debris, and annular faience beads.

Beneath this stratigraphic unit, which reached a depth of 30cm at its thickest point, there was a soil layer, which was partially disturbed where cut by grave pits. Only one of these has been excavated, which belonged to an infant with no grave goods. The skeleton was complete but the chest, the arms and the skull were disturbed by a rodent burrow. To judge from the legs the body was lying on the left side with a east-west orientation (Colour plate XXXIX). A collapsed mud-brick structure was only partially revealed by the excavation as it extended only along the western edge of the trench.

To better understand the deposit's consistency both in terms of depth and preservation of the anthropic layers, prior to enlarging the excavation area, we decided to make a deep sounding on an area of 2 x 1m. We reached the virgin soil at 2m from the surface, which corresponds to a 2.50m below our site datum (the highest point of the site). The deposit at 1.5m changed markedly from a quite loose sandy to a very hard compacted silty soil. In this lower section some living floors were identified. The dating of these deposits embraces the Neolithic and Early Khartoum periods.

During the next season the excavation area will be enlarged to allow the investigation of the Meroitic levels and the most ancient deposits.

The archaeological material located fell entirely within the Early and Late Mesolithic of Khartoum. The pottery is mainly represented by two types: a sub-angular quartz-tempered and a fine micaceous sand-tempered ware. Other types, much less represented, are fine to medium quartzite-micaceous sand and vegetal-tempered ware. The most common patterns of decoration are Wavy Line, Dotted Wavy Line, Rocker Stamp zigzag, plain or dotted, and Alternately Pivoting Stamp.

A graphic representation of the distribution of pottery types within the upper 50cm of the deposit shows that the sub-angular quartzitic ware tended to be more prevalent in the lowest stratigraphic units replacing the other, fine micaceous sand-tempered ware, most common in the upper

stratigraphic units. This picture is partly a by-product of pit excavations related both to settlement activities and the use of the area as a burial ground.

In SU 1006 and 1007 large fragments of Mesolithic Wavy Line pottery were reused as pottery burnishers. In general, we can say that this sub-angular quartzitic ware characterises the pottery assemblages of the other Early Khartoum Mesolithic sites recovered in the survey.

Another site where excavation was undertaken was 10-X-8, but proved disappointing as all the surface had been completely scraped away and foundation trenches had been excavated for the future construction of a mosque. Nevertheless, two test trenches, each one 2m square, were excavated at this site, one on the western slope and one in the centre of the site at its highest point.

The first trench exposed an eroded but recognisable living floor and the bottom of a large pit with archaeological material of the Late Neolithic period. The trench in the centre of the mound revealed that in this part of the site the anthropic deposit, even if very rich in archaeological material, has been completely disturbed by animal burrows and human pitting activities.

The Late Neolithic occupation should be extensively excavated in order to document it before erosion and human activities completely remove this very important evidence, particularly as few settlements of the Neolithic period have been excavated in Sudan.

As already mentioned, one of the latest sites found in the strip close to the Nile, Site 10-X-5, possibly dates to the Meroitic period. The cleaning of the naturally exposed section found along its southern edge brought to light an anthropic deposit more than 1.5m deep, which shows several habitation layers with mud-bricks walls, floors and well-preserved ovens. One oven was cleaned with a pot still *in situ*. The dating of the fragments of pottery collected during this operation was imprecise and the material requires further analysis. Charcoal was collected for radiocarbon determination. An iron bracelet and a faience bead were among the other objects from the site.

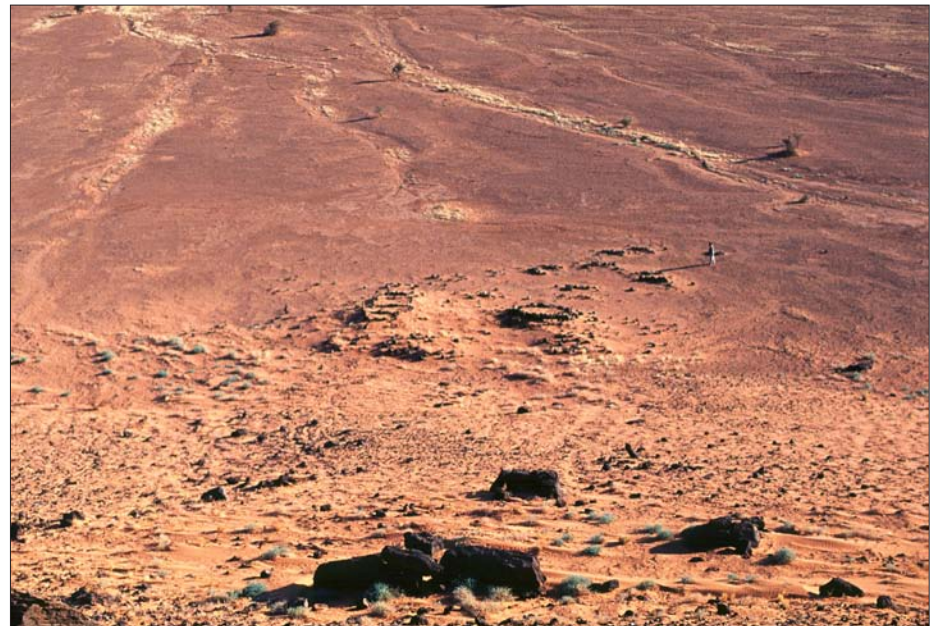
The main goals of the next field season will be the excavation to the virgin soil of a substantial trench at the Mesolithic site 10-X-6, the exploration of some of the cairns within the 10-U-21 and 10-U-3 cemeteries and, finally, the completion of the survey in the Jebel Baroka area where we expect to find further evidence of Middle and Lower Palaeolithic occupation.

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*Plate XXXVII.
El-Salha. View
of the Jebel
Baroka terrace.*



*Plate XXXVIII.
El-Salha. View
of the presumed
Christian cemetery,
Site 9-Y-12, located
at the foot of
Jebel Baroka.*



*Plate XXXIX.
El-Salha. Child
pit grave from Site
10-X-6.*