

SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Bulletin No. 13

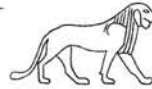
2009





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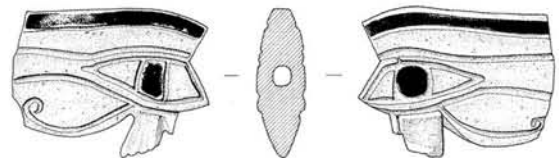
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Front cover: The head of a Kushite king, excavated in 2008, from the Amun temple at Dangeil. It has been tentatively identified as Aspelta (593-568 BC) based upon comparisons with statues of this king discovered at Jebel Barkal and Dokki Gel-Kerma. (Photo © J. R. Anderson, Berber-Abidiya Archaeological Project).

The New Kingdom Town on Sai Island (Northern Sudan)¹

Florence Doyen

Sai Island is one of the largest islands in the Middle Nile, in Sudanese Nubia. It is located between the Second and Third Cataracts in the Northern province of Sudan about 180km south of Wadi Halfa. Sai Island enjoys a favourable location thanks to a strategic hill, Jebel Adu, from which all its shores may be seen. As a result it has been continuously settled from Prehistoric to modern times. Some 50km² in area, Sai Island has been occupied by diverse peoples, dating to the Palaeolithic, Neolithic, pre-Kerma, Kerma, New Kingdom, Napatan, Meroitic, post-Meroitic, Medieval and Islamic periods.

Sai Island, upstream of the Second Cataract and the Batn el-Haggar, was known to the Ancient Egyptians from as early as the Middle Kingdom (Opsomer 2007, 58-63), as we know from the Execration Texts in which the toponym *Shaât* is attested. Sai Island was then occupied by a community controlled by the powerful kingdom ruled from Kerma, located upstream of the Third Cataract. During the New Kingdom, pharaohs did not neglect the old Middle Kingdom fortresses situated in the vicinity of the Second Cataract. This is demonstrated by various repairs or temple foundations, such as at Buhen or Mirgissa, in this context. Nevertheless, the ultimate expansion policy towards the south made its original defensive character superfluous.

From the time of Kamose onwards, Lower Nubia was for the most part pacified, but Sai Island remained inhabited by a Kerma community which had been living on the island for a millennium. The Egyptians considered their possessions under imminent threat from this Nubian population.

From the time of his first Nubian campaign, the pharaoh Ahmose (Davies 2005, 51) fought for the Khenthennefer land. At the beginning of the 18th Dynasty, a fortified town was founded on Sai Island (the first Egyptian outpost in Upper Nubia) with a temple, dedicated to the god Amun, ending Kerma's control of the island.

Thanks to the island's strategic position on the Nile, it appeared extremely attractive to the New Kingdom Egyptians; almost all of the pharaohs from Thutmose I to Thutmose III, dating from the first half of the 18th Dynasty, are attested here by inscriptions, as well as Thutmose III's viceroy Nehy and Amenhotep I, II and III (Minault-Gout 2006-2007). The Egyptian occupation of Sai Island lasted until the 20th Dynasty. From this period, there is evidence of contemporary cemeteries, both north and south of the pharaonic town, as at SAC5 (rock-tombs of the elite necropolis), SACP1 (mud-

brick tombs) and SAC4 (Late Kerma necropolis, mixed with tombs of Egyptian type; Gratien 2002, 224, 229). At the end of the New Kingdom, the fortified town was abandoned by the Egyptians; nevertheless, previous excavations in the southern part of the town demonstrated a continuous occupation of Nubian cultures, from the Meroitic and post-Meroitic eras to the Medieval period. At the end of the 16th century (AD 1585), the southern part of the former town was reoccupied as an Ottoman fortress, Qalat Sai, whose walls rise precipitously above the Nile cliffs (Alexander 1997) (Colour plate IX). This overlay approximately one quarter of the area enclosed by the New Kingdom town walls. On the destruction of the fortress by the army of Mohamed Ali (AD 1820), the site was deserted.

In 1954, modern research on Sai Island began, thanks to Professor Jean Vercoutter. Since that time, the island has been a French concession supervised by the University Charles-de-Gaulle - Lille 3 and financed by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Dr Francis Geus was Vercoutter's successor as Director of Excavations on Sai Island, from 1993 to 2005, the year of his death (Geus 2004). Thanks to the Lille 3 Committee of the Sai Excavations and to Professor Didier Devauchelle, Project Director, the Sai Island Archaeological Mission has recommenced with the author as temporary Field Director.

In Egyptology, fieldwork focusing on urban archaeology has been increasing over the last 40 years (Leclère 2008, 5-10). Studying the settlement organization of Egyptian foundations throughout Nubia has become a particular focus of interest (Morris 2005; Török 2009). Thanks to the study of Sai Island's pharaonic fortified town, one of the best preserved sites in Sudan, our understanding of the relationship between the urban and cultural settlements and contemporary New Kingdom cemeteries may be greatly improved.

From the sandstone temple, some 10m wide, only the lower stone foundations of the chapels remain on the western part of the building. Dated to the reign of Thutmose III, the foundation deposits (Thill 1997) confirm that he founded the temple which is evidenced by a text (S. 1), from Year 25, dedicated by Nehy, his viceroy (Vercoutter 1956, 74-75; 1973, 18-19; 1986, 13). Unfortunately, knowing who founded the temple does not produce a solution to the question of who founded the fortified town itself. This is generally attributed to the pharaoh Ahmose, or his successor Amenhotep I. Examination of the architectural stone blocks, scattered throughout the site, will soon resume, thanks to architect, Jean-François Carlotti; meanwhile, epigraphic study of the New Kingdom inscribed blocks is being undertaken by Florence Thill and Anne Minault-Gout.

The original excavations of the town and temple were led by Professor Jean Vercoutter: two fieldwork seasons in 1954-55 and 1955-56, followed by five campaigns 1969-70, 1970-71, 1971-72, 1973-74 and 1974, all conducted by the architect Michel Azim, as Field Director (Azim 1975). The southern part of the enclosure was exposed at that time.

¹ Sai Island Archaeological Mission, University Charles-de-Gaulle - Lille 3, France.



There were up to six levels of occupation recorded in which standing ruins were preserved: Pharaonic, Meroitic, post-Meroitic, two Medieval levels and lastly, an Islamic one. From reading the excavation diaries, it appears that a survey of a part of the northern enclosure wall was undertaken by M. Azim, in just four days, from 16th - 19th December 1973. After meeting him in June 2007, a decision was made to restart excavations in this area of the pharaonic fortified town, in which the earlier work had not been recorded, except for an unpublished sketch-drawing. The choice of location for the resumption of digging focused upon mud bricks, visible on the *kom* surface amongst rubbish, a few metres south of the French dig-house. Moreover, on the northern side of the town, there are no standing walls visible, probably due to wind erosion. We wanted to test the hypothesis that if the post-pharaonic levels had disappeared, access to pharaonic structures might be possible. Our main priority is to resume excavation inside the pharaonic fortified town (*mnnw š3ʿt*), of which only one third is documented by previous excavations.

The pharaonic town had been established on the north-eastern bank of Sai Island, on the sandstone plateau where the eastern edge of the cliff has partially collapsed (Colour plate IX). This town, founded at the beginning of the New Kingdom, is surrounded by an enclosure wall, regularly reinforced by square brick-towers and is orthogonally planned, its long axis oriented north-south. Two gates are known, leading into the fortified town through the western (SAF4) and southern enclosure walls. In the southern part of the town, different quarters spatially organised along north-south and east-west axes, have been identified such as the eastern palatial quarter SAF2, with a large columned hall and mud-brick paving, the central domestic quarter H, a cluster of five houses, and the western quarter SAF5, consisting of several rectangular storage rooms and circular silos (Colour plate IX). The western end of Temple A is aligned with the main axis NS1 (Azim 1975). The relative chronology of the various buildings is far from being understood. For example, Temple A is built upon an artificial gravel terrace, concealing mud-brick structures apparently organised along two perpendicular streets (Azim pers. comm.).

The excavation exposed approximately 600m², *i.e.* six 10m squares, in the last two digging seasons (from 12th January to 14th February 2008 and from 17th January to 19th February 2009) of SAV1 North sector (called SAV1N) (Colour plate X). At the beginning of our clearing work, we exposed exactly the same part of the northern enclosure wall which had already been surveyed by Michel Azim, 35 years previously. Seen from the north, different structures appeared, among them N2, a large brick-tower, slightly trapezoid shaped 7.95 x 5.20 x 7.55 x 5.10 m, around 35m² (Plate 1). This post-pharaonic structure abutted against the pharaonic enclosure wall N4, encompassing a smaller pharaonic brick-tower N3, in order



Plate 1. SAV1N, view to south (© SLAM, F. Doyen).

to repair or enlarge it. This small brick-tower, projecting from the northern enclosure wall, is of the same type and proportions as those towers along the southern enclosure wall. The dimensions of N3 are 2 x 2.4m whilst the enclosure wall is 4.26m thick and composed of ten rows of mud-brick headers, aligned north-south. One may observe the regular bonding of brick courses, composed of headers and stretchers in alternate layers, regularly interrupted by bricks laid in various position, enabling them to follow the undulating substratum. This thick structure N4 is badly damaged by large holes dug into it. On the eastern side of the small brick-tower, a wall (1W), curved westwards, appeared. Above structure N3 and wall 1W stands the larger, post-pharaonic, brick-tower (N2). Structure N2 effectively increased the surface area of structure N3 sevenfold. The nature of these structures' foundations requires further investigation, as their foundation trenches are rather unusual. This is due to the nature of the soil, which is full of clustered pebbles, the result of a natural or man-made fill, making the trenches almost indistinguishable.

South of the northern enclosure wall, inside the fortified town, about 40 walls have been uncovered, some still preserved to a height of half a dozen brick courses. Despite these incomplete walls, which require further investigation to elucidate both their chronology and spatial organisation, two significant, similar structures N6 and N7 were discovered. Both of these share a common feature: a pit, cut into the natural pebbles of the jebel. These are square or rectangular in shape and carefully lined with rendered mud bricks, ostensibly to preserve the pit contents (presumably for storage purposes). The structure N8, coated with mud, could be a basin in an area probably devoted to kitchen activities (Plate 2).

South of the northern enclosure wall, N4, the remains of walls 18, 19 and 20 were discovered during the removal of Level 1, being mostly composed of aeolian sand, potsherds and mud-brick fragments. Level 2, a destruction/demolition layer, is characterised by its numerous collapsed walls and mud bricks, both complete and broken, sometimes burnt,



Plate 2. SAV1N, view to west (© SLAM, F. Doyen).

and by pieces of mud render from hearths along with several architectural sandstone blocks, both whole and fragmentary, possibly used as door-pivot stones. All this was within a matrix of silted earth and large quantities of potsherds. During this operation, the remains of walls 2-11, 13-17, 21 and 22 were uncovered. Level 3 appears below walls 18 and 19 and is mostly brown in colour (except for the ash-filled hearth) and is composed of loose, silty earth, mixed with a large quantity of small vegetal remains, charcoal and potsherds. Level 3 consists of successive occupation layers, and should prove particularly useful to the question of dating, following the analyses of ceramics and charcoal samples. Some hearths are associated with Level 3, as may be seen between walls 10 and 11 and alongside wall 7S and in the interior of structure N8, near the inner corner of walls 3E and 3S. Walls 23, 25 (only attested by the coating layer which indicated a wall one-brick thick) and 26 are associated with Level 3. A further level, composed of pebbles, was identified, but is as yet unexplored.

In the western exposed section of structure N4 (Colour plate X), the enclosure wall was cut in such a way as to create rooms, divided by walls 20 and 21, and additionally to accommodate stairs.

As noted previously by Michel Azim, different types of bricks had been used in the wall construction. One can observe, even within a single wall or structure, some variation in the dimensions of the bricks, ranging from 400 x 200 x 110mm to 330 x 150 x 100mm. Moreover, some bricks display marks on the large rectangular surface, such as double, or triple, oblique and parallel lines (Plate 3), one diagonal line, depressions made with two fingers, or impressions of three, four, or five fingertips. Study of the bricks' location, of their comparative dimensions and marks, might provide evidence either about their chronology, and/or information about the workshop from which they originated.

Concerning the preliminary analysis relating to material cultural remains, examination of the ceramic evidence confirms New Kingdom occupation, whilst the Meroitic, post-Meroitic and Medieval periods are also, to a lesser extent, attested. Amongst the 477 objects collected, the vast majority were stone implements used to grind, or to mix materials such as pounders (171), many grinding stones (78), silex blades (10) and some small palettes (8). Amongst the fired and unfired clay objects there are nine figurines, both human and animal, three seal-stamps and three jar stoppers. There are about 50 blue faience fragments, most of which belong to the Nun-bowl type, two stone vessels and one fragmentary stela, allowing us to confirm the presence of pharaonic New Kingdom occupation.

The Sai Island Archaeological Mission's objective is to gather data about the settlement and to shed light upon the original spatial organisation of this unique pharaonic fortified town, founded at the very beginning of the 18th Dynasty. Through the study of the different wall remains, of the levels upon which the walls stand and of associated mud floors, we aim to understand the history of the successive phases of occupation and define the relative chronology of the different structures. The site raises many questions, such as the dating of its foundation, the chronology of its various reoccupations, the dating of its ceramics, the architecture of the temple (one, or more?), the corpus of inscriptions, etc. If the excavations of SAV1N,



Plate 3. SAV1N: walls 5N and 5W, view to the east. Marks such as double, or triple oblique and parallel lines are visible on top of the mud bricks (© SLAM, F. Doyen).



the pharaonic fortified town, are far from over, the initial fieldwork is indeed promising and should lead in due course to more comprehensive observations as the work progresses.

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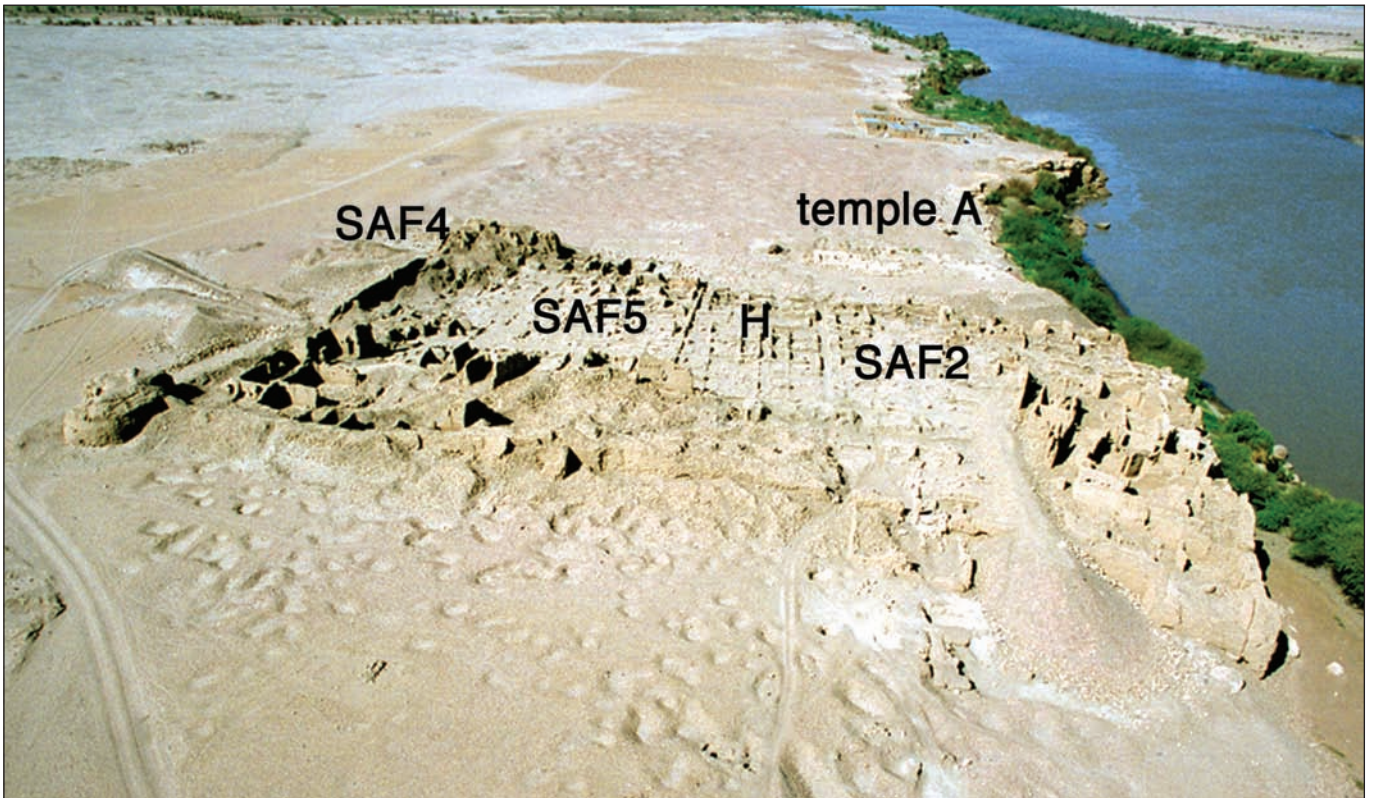
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Colour Plate IX. Qalat Sai and various quarters of the pharaonic fortified town, view to north (© B.-N. Chagny).



Colour Plate X. Sai. SAV1N, view to east (© SLAM, F. Doyen).