

An Interim Report on Excavations in the UCL-SARS Concession, Northern Sudan, Winter 2003/2004

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Introduction

Excavations in Sudan were undertaken last winter (December 2003 to February 2004) by a team from the Institute of Archaeology, University College London (UCL), under the auspices of the Sudan Archaeological Research Society (SARS), UK and the National Corporation for Antiquities & Museums (NCAM) based in Khartoum, Sudan. This expedition is one of several underway in the Fourth Cataract region of Sudan (Fig. 1).

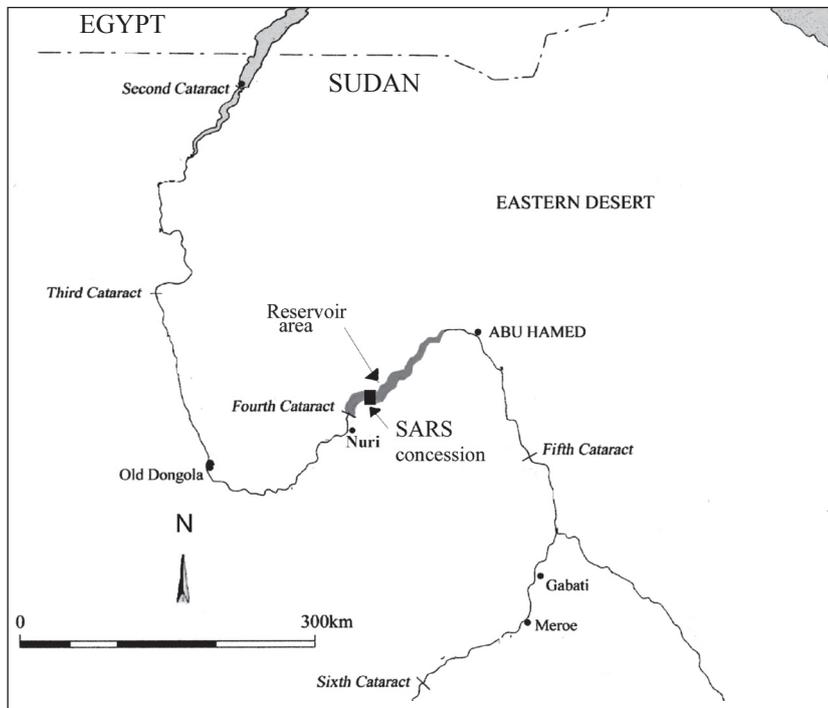


Figure 1. Map of Egypt and Sudan showing the location of the future Merowe Dam reservoir (grey area) at the Fourth Cataract and the SARS concession (black square) within it.

Recently, the government of Sudan initiated plans to construct the Merowe Dam at the Fourth Cataract, which is just south of the famed pyramids at Nuri, where Kushite rulers were interred (Dunham 1955). The whole region south of the cataract proper, from Amri Island to Kirbekan, will be submerged in 2008, and countless villages will have

been relocated. This interim report discusses archaeological material recovered from four different sites from various chronological periods (Table 1).

Period	Dates
Late Neolithic	4000-3500 BC
Kushite/Napatan	700-300 BC
Early Meroitic	300-1 BC
Middle Meroitic	AD 1-250
Late Meroitic	AD 250-400
Post-Meroitic	AD 400-600
Early Christian	AD 600-850
Classic Christian	AD 850-1100
Late and Terminal Christian	AD 1100-1500
Islamic	AD 1500-present

Table 1. Periods mentioned in this report and their respective dates.

Research Topics

The winter 2003/2004 UCL-SARS archaeological expedition focused its research on three main themes: settlement archaeology, ceramic consumption (within the context of a larger trading network) and agricultural practices. The islands in the SARS concession (Fig. 2) considered for possible future excavation were first surveyed (with the exception of Ishashi) by Derek Welsby of the British Museum (Welsby 2000, 2003). Extensive studies of modern farming practices and crop cultivation within the concession area were conducted by Ruth Pelling (PhD student at UCL), rock art and 'rock gong' sites by Cornelia Kleinitz (in press), while the author examined ceramics recovered from all sites.

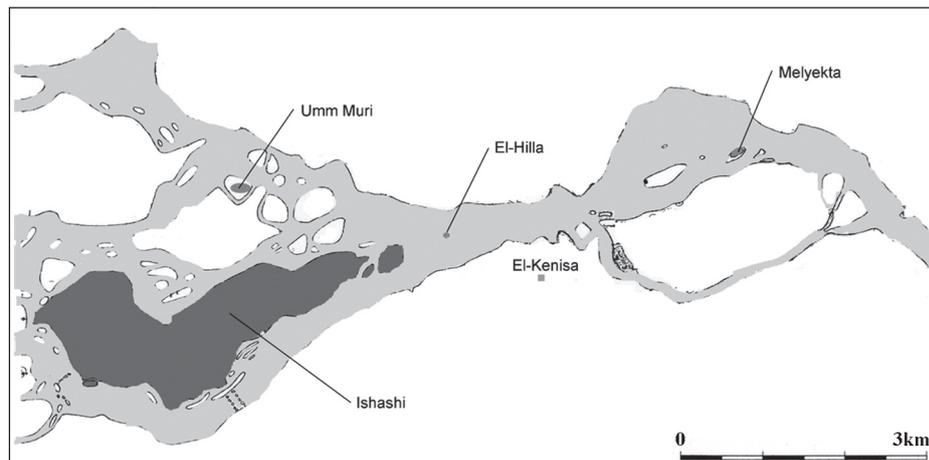


Figure 2. Map delineating the SARS concession and indicating the islands studied.

The regions of the Fourth and Fifth Cataracts have largely been overlooked by scholars studying the settlement history of northern Sudan in late antiquity. Given their harsh desert climate, the regions have been seen as a wasteland and a dangerous place for river travel and trade because of rapids and strong currents. It has long been assumed that desert caravan routes and pedestrian roads were the primary links between religious town sites of the Napatan and Meroitic periods (e.g. Kawa, Sanam and Meroe), thereby bypassing these regions altogether. Thus, settlements dating to the Meroitic period, such as the one discovered at Umm Muri, were not expected to be uncovered.

Methodology and Results

The 2003/2004 field season began with a survey of each of the islands, conducted on foot by two teams of four to six people. A global positioning system (GPS) was used to record points every 10m, as well as the find spots of important artefacts, rock art or visible architecture.

Following a walking survey of each island under examination, 10x10 metre squares were set out and divided into four quadrants. Artefacts were surface collected from one quadrant of each square, and artefact density was then taken as an indication of the best place to begin test pits. Only in rare instances did test pits lead to full excavations. These exceptions were the burials uncovered on Melyekta and the settlements on Umm Muri and Melyekta.

In the following sections, each island studied during this field season is described, and the findings for each island are summarised.

Ishashi

The island of Ishashi stretches over 3km in length; it is the largest island within the SARS concession area (Fig. 2). Although Ishashi was not originally within the intended scope of the first field season, the survey on Ishashi and the surface-gathered artefacts helped the team to construct an occupational history and gain a general understanding of the settlement concentrations found on the island. Aided by satellite images of the island and GPS equipment, two teams conducted a walking survey of the island during the first month of the field season. In total, 62 sites were recorded on the island, 33 of them functioning as rock art sites (Kleinitz in press). Cemeteries and four settlement sites dating from the Christian period were also discovered. Ceramics from the Ishashi survey were mainly handmade wares dating from the Late Christian to the Islamic periods. A small number of fine wares dating to the Early Christian and Terminal Christian periods suggests some ceramic trade between the Fourth Cataract and ceramic-producing cities like Dongola and Faras. Similar Early Christian fine wares were also found at the Early Christian church site of El-Kenisa (Fig. 2). David Wengrow (UCL) conducted test excavations on Ishashi. Mounds located near an area of prehistoric rock art proved to be sterile.

Melyekta

The island of Melyekta is currently uninhabited, but a dense layer of goat dung on the surface attests to seasonal use of the island for pastoral activities. Surface collection

of artefacts on Melyekta was conducted in quadrants (Fig. 3), as described above. Artefacts were found in an area ranging from 200m east-west and 1560m north-south. Finds included glass, ostrich eggshell (*Struthio camelus* L.) (both worked and rough), faience and spindle whorls, as well as human and faunal remains. After documenting the finds from the sampled quadrants, test excavations began in those areas with the heaviest artefact density and/or most varied artefact assemblages. Throughout the survey and excavation, sherds were counted and weighed, and diagnostic ceramics were incorporated into a fabric sequence and saved for further study.

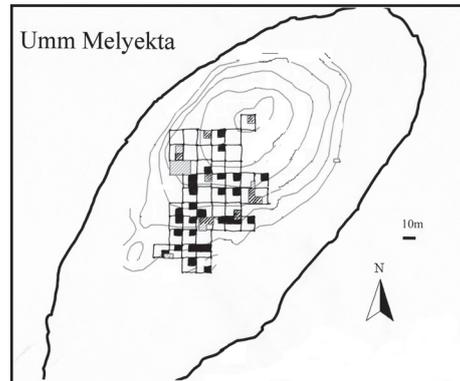


Figure 3. Site plan of Melyekta with grid system. Dark boxes indicate areas of ceramic collection and hatched areas show excavation areas.

Excavations at the northern end of Melyekta uncovered storage pits and intact burials ranging from the Late Neolithic to the Post-Meroitic and Christian periods. Post-Meroitic burials of two elderly women were discovered with ceramic funerary assemblages typical of the period, including beer jars, oil jars and bowls. One of the beer jars from these burials was elaborately painted with a so-called ‘hunting scene’ (Fig. 4). The placement of these graves in a secluded island locale – instead of the usual conspicuous desert wadi – along with the absence of stone tumuli, may hint at a difference in local burial customs as well as the important status of elder women in this region during late antiquity.

Remnants of postholes and storage pits were found in the northern and southern sectors of the Melyekta excavation area, while house remnants and a ceramic assemblage dating after the 13th century were found in the southeastern area of the island. Architectural remains included a wattle and daub fence with impressions of vegetable matter and a courtyard containing mud storage pots (*somas*) for domestic use. One sherd of an imported Syrian glaze ware as well as a reused Terminal Christian jar neck provided us with convenient *terminus post quem* dates for the courtyard and dwelling, respectively.

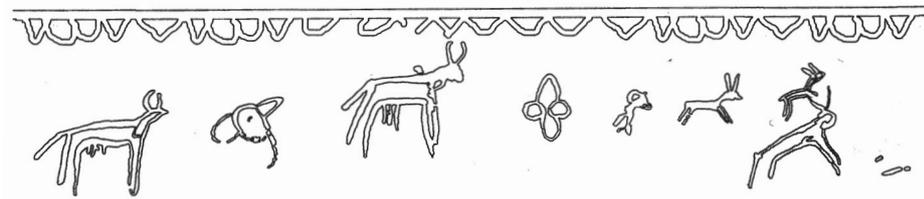


Figure 4. Painted ‘hunting scene’ on a beer jar from a Post-Meroitic burial on Melyekta.

El-Hilla

Excavation on the alluvial island of El-Hilla (Fig. 2) lasted only three weeks. A fortified building prominently situated on the island was excavated to the bedrock, yielding a small assemblage of local handmade ceramics, beads and smoking pipe fragments of the Islamic tradition. The assemblage attests to a short period of occupation in the 17th-18th centuries.

Umm Muri

The uninhabited island of Umm Muri (Fig. 2) was surveyed in 1999 by SARS, and a settlement site 200m long (east-west) and 150m wide (north-south) was discovered. Threshing floors (*taigas*) (shown as hatched circles on Fig. 5) attest to seasonal use of the island along the riverbanks for cultivation and pastoral activities. Full excavation on Umm Muri began after a preliminary investigation of three test pits oriented east to west across the middle of the island to determine the depth of the archaeological deposits. Mudbricks and the stone foundations of an enclosure wall were uncovered within these test pits. Across the surface of the island, severe deflation of the archaeological levels due to wind erosion left ceramics from various periods littering the surface, jumbling various occupational layers, with only one to three metres separating the alluvium from the surface.

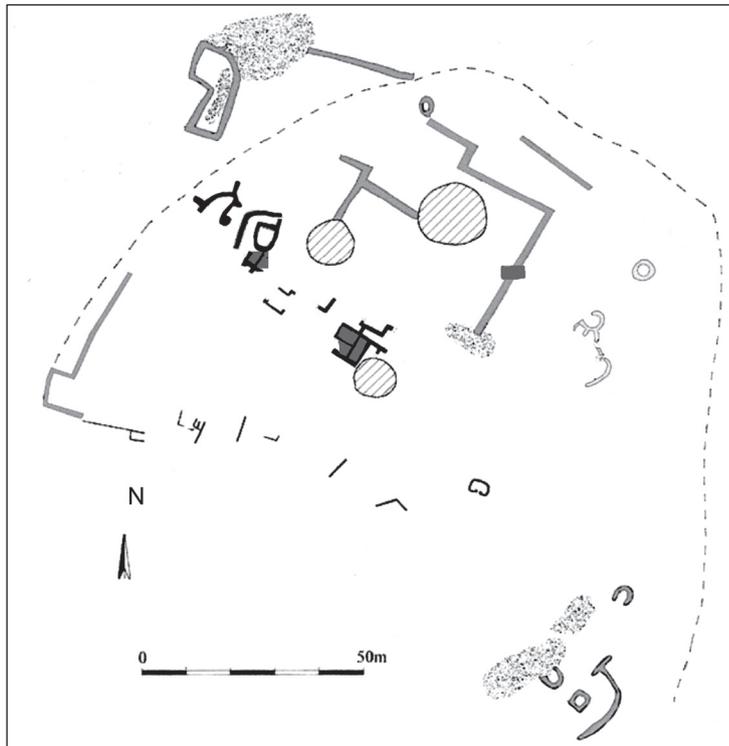


Figure 5. Site plan of Umm Muri. Grey concentrations indicate test pit areas. Hatched circles indicate modern threshing floors.

Further excavations concentrated on the mudbrick foundations of a structure found immediately below a modern threshing floor. As clearing continued, it became evident that a four-room structure was present. Ceramics, archaeobotanical remains, as well as tear-drop shaped loom weights, attested to an occupation during the Late Meroitic period (for comparable loom weights see Trigger 1967: fig. 30). Sherds typical of the Late Meroitic period, and handmade bowls from the Early Meroitic or Early Christian periods were recovered from the floor of the structure and a nearby complex of rooms. Fine wares found on Umm Muri (see Fig. 6) also confirm the occupation of the island during the Late Meroitic and Early Christian periods.

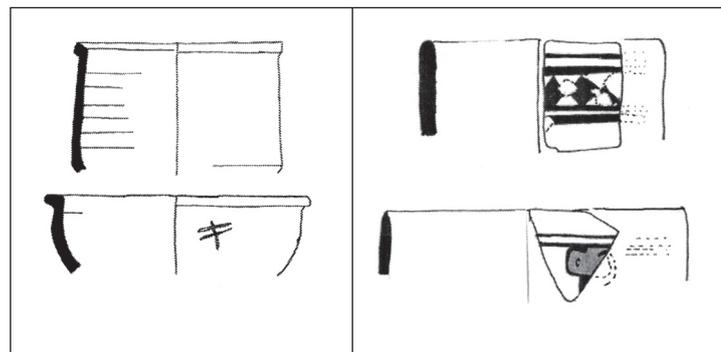


Figure 6. Ceramics recovered from Umm Muri: ledge-rimmed bowls (left); painted Meroitic cups (right), which signify the presence of prestige trade goods in the Fourth Cataract (not to scale).

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

In summary, Neolithic and Christian period occupation on Ishashi and Melyekta islands is verified by recovered ceramics and associated finds (*e.g.* burials and settlement deposits). Newly discovered architecture, ceramics and botanical remains clearly indicate occupation on Umm Muri during the Late Meroitic and Early Christian periods. What is not clear is whether a hiatus in settlement existed on Umm Muri between the Late Meroitic period and the Early Christian period, and if such a hiatus fuelled new synchronic settlements on the neighbouring islands of Ishashi, Mis, Melyekta and at the site of El-Kenisa. Archaeological investigation also has shown continual occupation of Ishashi and seasonal habitation on El-Hilla during the Islamic period.

Archaeobotanical evidence from sealed deposits on Umm Muri, in conjunction with modern farming studies conducted by Ruth Pelling, demonstrate a continuum of cultivation from the Late Meroitic period to the present day. In addition to traditional winter crops, such as emmer wheat (*Triticum dicoccum* L.) and barley (*Hordeum vulgare* L.), sub-Saharan savannah summer crops such as hyacinth bean (*Lablab purpureus* L.) Sweet), cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata* (L.) Walp.) and sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor* (L.) Moench) were also present at Umm Muri (Fuller in press). The presence of sorghum has recently been dated by accelerated mass spectroscopy (AMS) to before 400

BC, providing evidence for the domestication of this staple crop in the region around a thousand years earlier than previously thought (Rowley-Conwy *et al.* 1997, 1999). Sorghum samples from Umm Muri have been dated to approximately the third to first centuries BC (Cal 230-50 BC) (Fuller *in press*). This early date is also supported by the Umm Muri handmade wares. Following the excavation, further examination of the handmade ceramics which dominate Umm Muri suggests that these wares may be a mixture of both Early Meroitic ceramic traditions (which are poorly documented) and Early Christian wares (Adams 1986).

Since there is now evidence of Meroitic-period settlement in the Fourth Cataract, a goal of future field seasons will be to assess the importance of the site of Umm Muri in comparison to other sites of Meroitic date in Lower Nubia and central Sudan. Although the presence of prestige goods, such as ivory, glass vessels and metals like bronze, gold and iron, suggest that developed trade networks existed in the Fourth Cataract during antiquity, the level of restriction concerning access to these valued goods within communities or regional areas remains unclear. Another topic of interest is the social identity of populations in the Fourth Cataract – namely, if possessing such valuable prestige goods labelled the owners as ‘Meroitic’. Data such as settlement size and occupational history, as well as the assemblage of artefacts and ceramics, will be taken into account to better assess the status of the island of Umm Muri in the Meroitic period and the Early and Late Christian periods within the later Christian kingdom of Makouria.

Two types of fine wares have also been recovered from Umm Muri thus far: ‘semi-fine wares’ (*cf.* Edwards 1998), including beer jars and ledge-rimmed bowls, and examples of Meroitic fine ware cups (Fig. 6) which may have been produced in central Sudan around the capital at Meroe and traded to contemporary sites like Gabati (Fig. 1) and Umm Muri. The location of fine ware production sites in ancient Sudan has long eluded scholars. Except for elite cemeteries like those at Faras, Karanog and Meroe, and the fine ware pottery workshops at Musawwarat es-Sufra, consumption of Nubian fine wares at settlements throughout Sudan during the Meroitic period is very low. In addition to the Meroitic fine wares found on Umm Muri, Christian fine wares and plain wheel-made utility wares were found on Umm Muri, Melyekta and Ishashi. Although no direct sourcing of Christian fine wares and utility wares has yet been possible, it can be assumed that such ceramics were likely made at Faras or Dongola, the administrative and manufacturing centres for this region during the Christian period.

The next field season will commence during the winter of 2004 and will focus primarily on the island of Umm Muri. Surveys of Christian churches in the vicinity may be included if time permits. We hope to excavate fully the settlement at Umm Muri during the next season, incorporating the system of context squares and grids used in this field season. Ceramic analysis will continue on the island to identify new vessel form types and fabrics, which will help us to further understand the occupational history and lifeways of the inhabitants of Umm Muri during the past.

Acknowledgments

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