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Saffi Island: Merowe Dan Archaeological Survey Project

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SAFFI ISLAND

MEROWE DAM ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY PROJECT

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In February-March 2004 the author, acting upon invitation from NCAM, organized a survey and follow-up salvage operation on Saffi Island within the NCAM concession.¹

The island, together with the neighboring Uli in the Jebel Kulgeila Reach of the Nile, is a high-priority agenda for the Merowe Dam Archaeological Survey Project (=MDASP), since both will be among the first sites to be flooded by the artificial lake created behind the dam.

The only testimony before the time of Terence Gray's and Thabit Hassan Thabit's visit to the island in 1949² is a brief note by R.C. Lepsius dated to 1844.³ In 2000, a team from the Institute of Developing Countries at the Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies of Warsaw University carried out a season of field research focused on agricultural economy in general and on changes in traditional agriculture in the rural farming communities of Saffi Island in particular.⁴

- 1 A joint mission of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of Warsaw University and the National Museum in Warsaw worked on the island from February 8 until March 27, 2004. The staff consisted of regular members of the Southern Dongola Reach Survey (SDRS), active in the area in 1997-2003. Mr. Piotr Osypiński and Mrs. Marta Osypińska did most of the fieldwork, helped by Mr. Artur Obłuski, Mrs. Edyta Klimaszewska-Drobot and Mr. Habab Idriss representing the NCAM. Most of the ceramic drawings were done by Mrs. Edyta Klimaszewska-Drobot, Ms Dobrochna Zielińska and Mrs. Marta Osypińska; the latter also studied the animal and human bones.
- 2 T. Gray, *The Fourth Cataract*, SNR 30 (1949), 120-130.
- 3 R. Lepsius, *Briefe aus Aegypten, Aethiopien und der Halbinsel des Sinai* (Berlin 1852), 245.
- 4 J. Gudowski, *Roľnictwo i jego ekonomiczne efekty. Badania terenowe w dystrykcie Karima*, in: *Wokół IV Katarakty*, ed. M. Ząbek (Warszawa 2005), 123-124.



Fig. 1. Archaeological sites on Saffi Island
(Map update P. Osypiński)

2004 SURVEY

Fieldwalking of the island in 2004 resulted in the registering of 72 sites. Seven of these were excavated either in part or in whole [Fig. 1]. All discovered sites were GPS-positioned and located on a 1:20,000 calibrated contour map of the island using Fugawi software.

The Saffi Island site classification profile as registered in 2004 is as follows:

· Settlements	16
· Rock drawing sites	5
· Rock gongs	3
· Single buildings	5
· Iron smelting sites	2
· Graves (single)	12
· Tumulus cemeteries	20
· Cobblestones (pavings)	2
· Box graves	8
· Dome tombs	4

The breakdown by chronological periods is as follows:

· Middle Paleolithic	2
· Early Neolithic	7

· Late Neolithic	4
· Kerma Horizon	30
· Proto-Kushite/ Napatan	2
· Post-Meroitic	2
· Dongola Period	24
· Funj/Modern	2

A comprehensive report on this season has already been published and the reader is referred to this for details of the survey and excavations in 2004.⁵ As noted there, the cultural history of a Nile island close to Napata need not be a model for other of the river islands upstream, not to mention the riverbanks, which were dependent on an entirely different economy. At the forefront of the investigations at this point are ceramic studies, the objective being to fine-hone a tool for cultural identification and dating in the Fourth Cataract region. Hence, it has been deemed useful to present here a more detailed report on the results of excavations in three of the sites on Saffi Island, adding to the growing body of ceramic evidence.⁶

THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF THE ISLAND

Tumulus cemeteries definitely dominate the landscape of the island. Tombs of this kind appeared on the island with the emergence of Kerma-related pottery and remained a standard sepulchral monument until the very end of the Post-Meroitic, eventually to be replaced by box graves in the Dongola Period. Both plateaus and wadi-beds were deemed good locations for these tombs, which vary in size and construction technique. On the whole, however, they pre-

sent a flattened cross-section. Caldera-like depressions in the tops usually are evidence of heavy plundering in the past.

Small stone tumuli from the Kerma Horizon, situated on rocky plateaus, were sometimes accompanied by 'cobblestones', which were not graves in the strict sense of the term, but were never encountered outside the sepulchral complexes. These pavings were either oval, about 0.50 m across, or subrectangular, 3 x 1.50 m, and they were

5 B. Żurawski, "The archaeology of Saffi Island (2004 season)," *GAMAR* 4 (2005), 199-218 (including site gazetteer).

6 Cf. contribution by E. Klimaszewska-Drabot & A. Obtuski in this volume, 329-337, publishing supplementary material to that already presented in J. Phillips, E. Klimaszewska-Drabot, "Saffi Island, 2004: An Overview of the Ceramics", *GAMAR* 4 (2005), 117-123.

invariably oriented N-S (if a longer axis was present). Their role in funerary practice and post-mortuary ceremonies is difficult to assess.

Box graves constituted an equally abundant category. Individual graves ranged from 0.50 x 1.00 m to 1.00 x 2.50 m and about 0.70 m in height and were always aligned E-W. They were found on the silted or sandy plains of the lower parts of the island, usually clustered in well organised cemeteries of 100 or more. However, concentrations as small as one or two graves of this kind were also registered. Sometimes they were accompanied by rectangular stone structures which could have served as funerary chapels or churches. Curiously enough, these graves were also robbed even though preserved examples produced few if any artifacts.

The third group of graves were the so-called 'dome-tombs'. These were mostly c. 3 m in diameter, although examples of about 1 m in diameter were also noted. Their height did not exceed 0.70 m and they were raised on flat rock surfaces with

no grave pit. Clusters of these tombs occupied prominent landmarks, such as the topmost part of rocky formations. Like the other sepulchers, these tombs were plundered and their superstructures pulled down, leaving bones and potsherds strewn about.

The Saffi cemeteries are frequently associated with settlement sites. These are recognized through large surface scatters of pottery fragments, stone tools (including querns and grinders), as well as animal bones. On some sites of this kind, remains of hearths or small kilns in the form of burnt clay concentrations of about 2 m in diameter were also found.

Grouped on the eastern bank of the island were modern but already abandoned villages, dating from the Funj-Modern Period (partly overlapping the earlier Dongola period settlements). They hold enormous potential for ethno-archaeological studies in view of the fact that they are usually situated near or directly on archaeological sites, in the same ecological context that has remained constant for centuries.