

Bogdan Żurawski

The Southern Dongola Reach Survey, 1998

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DONGOLA REACH

THE SOUTHERN DONGOLA REACH

SURVEY, 1998/1999

Bogdan Żurawski

The Southern Dongola Reach Survey (SDRS) is a joint project of the Research Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums of the Sudan, and is supported by the Polish Center of Archaeology of Warsaw University and the Poznań Archaeological Museum.¹⁾ The second field season was effected during the winter of 1998/1999 (December 12, 1998-February 1999). It was intended as a high intensity, wide-ranging survey with integral GPS/GIS mapping of the right bank of the river from Old Dongola to Ed-Diffar (Fig. 1). Its primary aim was to record and assess the significance of a broad range of archaeological and historical sites, as well as to reconstruct the variations in settlement patterns within the southern part of the survey area.

The survey and excavations lasted until the end of February 1999. Apart from reconnoitering the right bank of the Nile, trial trenches and excavations on a limited scale were conducted on a Neolithic site near Argi (field no. MG 4), in the northern part of the Napatan temple in Soniyat, and on the post-Meroitic tumuli field north of Abkur village.²⁾

¹⁾ First season results were reported by the author in *PAM X, Reports 1998* (1999), 149-160.

²⁾ The mission was directed by the author assisted by Dr. Mahmoud El-Tayeb and Ms Małgorzata Śladkowska, and included Mr. Piotr Osypiński, Ms Marta Gauza, Mr. Paweł Rurka, archaeologists; Mr. Tadeusz Kucharek, technical assistant. The following students of archaeology from Warsaw University volunteered, as before, for the project: Mr. Kazimierz Kotlewski, Ms Anna Błaszczuk, Ms Edyta Klimaszewska, Ms Paulina Terendy, Mr. Sebastian Drabot, Ms Urszula Wincenciak. Their reconnoitering on foot, as well as drawing of the pottery and lithics was an inestimable contribution to the project. Assisted by Gauza. Kotlewski also photographed the 1897 collected artifacts. As in the previous season, the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) provided for efficient help and competent assistance in the person of senior inspector, Mr. Amel Awad Mokhtar, who was assigned to the project.

recorded. The oldest group (53 sites and 12 more sharing features in common with this group) is dated tentatively to the Middle and Lower Palaeolithic (Fig. 2).⁴⁾ The artifacts assigned to this horizon represent various stages of the *chaîne opératoire*, starting from the preforms of cores and massive flakes of the first stage of debitage through the phase of flake and blade core exploitation to the damaged and heavily used tools, as well as implements bearing traces of reutilization. Special attention is due the sites containing Middle Paleolithic assemblages mixed heavily with fossilized bones. The second oldest horizon (Upper Paleolithic) is represented by 11 lithic assemblages with a high content of artifacts produced by blade methods and techniques of soft percussion often associated with faceting the striking platform (18 more could be assigned to this group, however not without hesitation).

In the Stone Age horizon, Neolithic sites preponderate (64 sites). Some 15

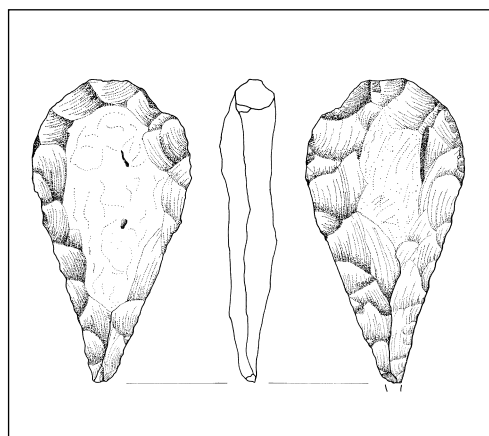


Fig. 2. Hand axe (SDRS 22/99). Ferrogenous sandstone. H. 16.8 cm, W. 8.6 cm. (Drawing A. Błaszczak, P. Osypiński)

assemblages could be hesitantly assigned to this group. The Neolithic assemblages reflect the typical inventories recorded in areas neighboring on the survey area (Figs. 3, 4). The Neolithic industries characterized by a high percentage of segments, perforators, bores and scrapers (with small quantities of burins) rely on flake exploitation of cores with one platform (mostly with the striking platform formed by a single negative).

The site chosen for testing (MG 4 = N.18°04'08", E.30°59'23") belongs to the copious category of sites tentatively dated to the Early Neolithic (= Early Khartoum Related Group). Their distinctive trait is the wind and rain erosion of the uppermost layers that has exposed the lower (older) strata containing bone concentrations and ceramics with slight or no visible effects of wind and water.

Stone artifacts have also been recorded on historic sites. It seems certain that flint knappers practiced their trade throughout the Kerma and Napatan periods. The emergence of large-scale iron metallurgy in the Early Meroitic period seems to mark the effective end of the Stone Age in the Middle Nile Valley.

The osteological material was recorded on c. 300 of the sites registered. Animal bones were most abundantly represented on Neolithic and Christian sites.⁵⁾ The oldest (fossilized) bones originate from Paleolithic sites (KK 66 and KK 67 = N.18°01'34", E.31°10'29" and N.18°01'30", E.31°10'26", respectively) occupying part of a huge plateau at the foot of the gebel between Abkur and Ed-Diffar. In the Paleolithic it was a water-logged marshy ground (in fact, the environment was definitely humid as late as the Christian Period

⁴⁾ P. Osypiński has kindly provided these preliminary remarks on the lithic material.

⁵⁾ This part of the report makes use of an analysis of the faunal remains prepared by M. Gauza.

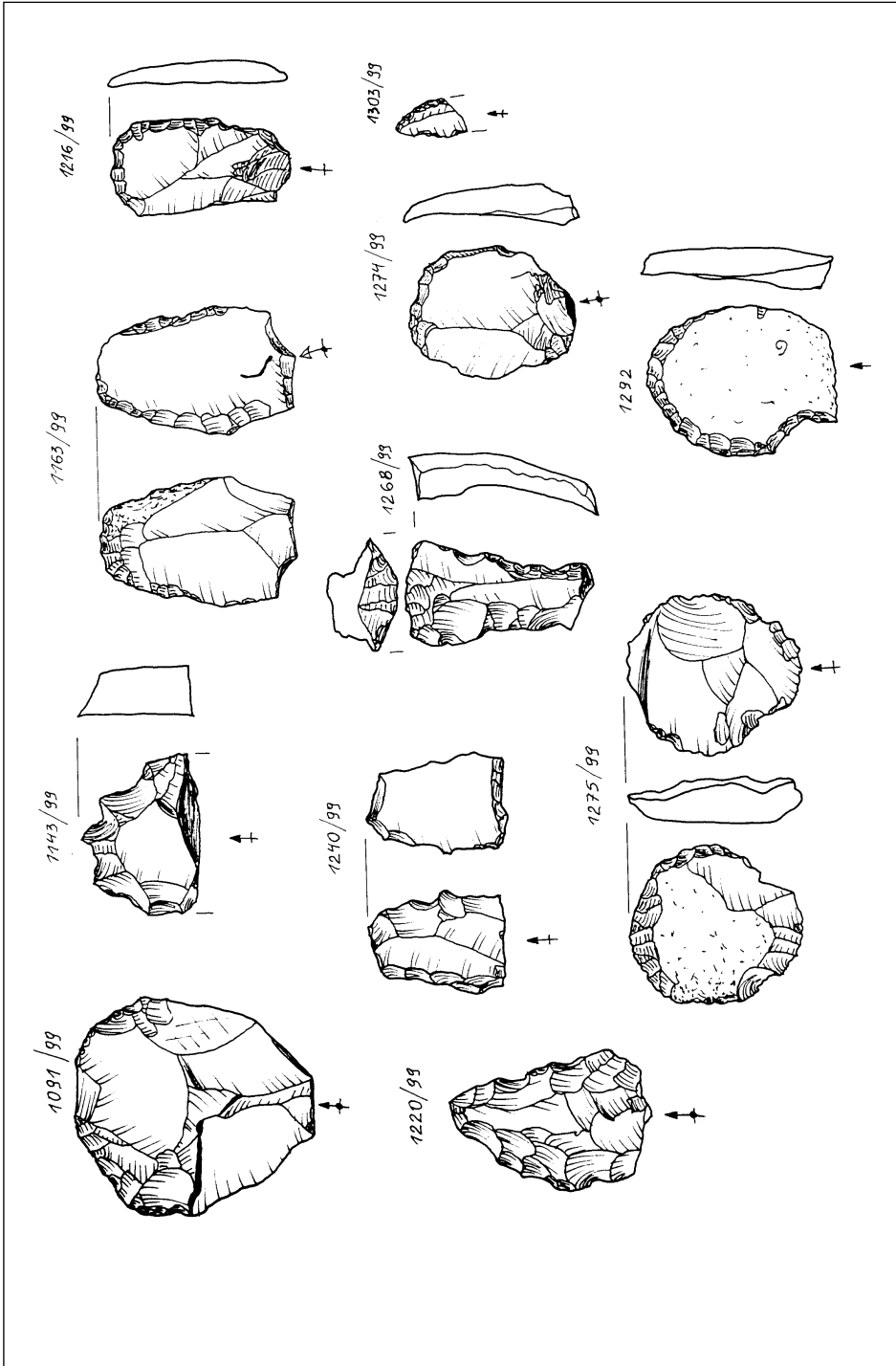


Fig. 3. Flint tools
(Drawing K. Kotleuski and P. Osypiński)

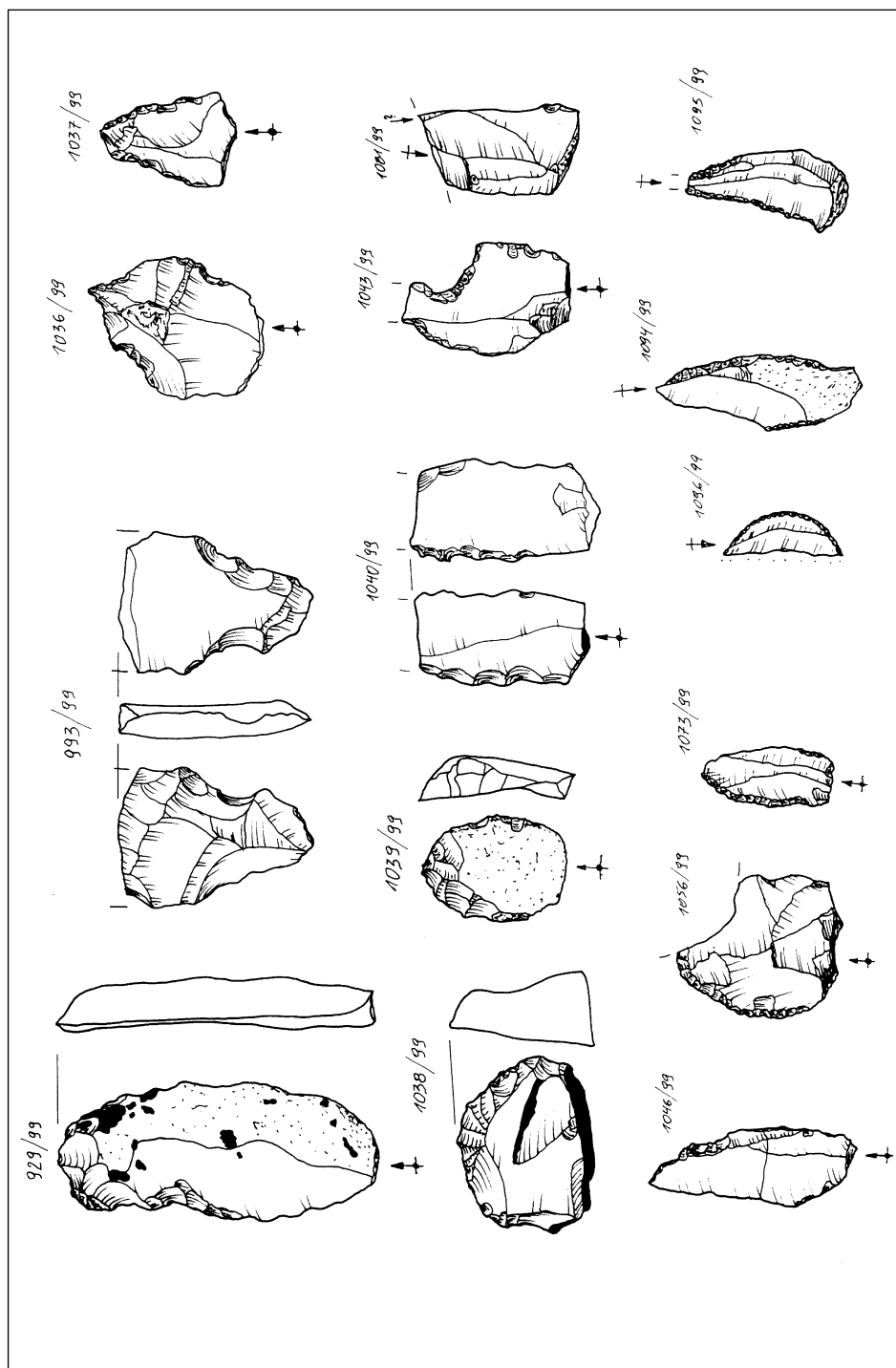


Fig. 4. Flint tools
(Drawing K. Kotleuski and P. Osypiński)

when the region, guarded by the two huge fortresses of Abkur (Istabel) and Ed-Diffar, sustained a considerable sedentary population).

Fossilized bones have survived in remarkably good condition, enabling species identification in most cases. Some bones bear traces of consumption and pre-consumption quartering. Some were split with sharp stone tools in order to extract the marrow. Fossilized ashes still stick to some of the bones. More than 100 bone fragments were gathered on KK 66 and KK 67; 75% belonging to mammals and 25% to fish. The mammals slaughtered and consumed on these two sites included young (1-1.5 year old) ruminants, such as gazelles. Most of the bone fragments belonged to the ribs, legs, shoulders and pelvises. Crania, whether complete or fragmentary, are almost totally absent (only one tiny fragment of lower jaw was found). It naturally leads to the conclu-

sion that the animals were quartered at the killing site and only the best parts were carried to the settlements.

Animal bones and mollusk shells were recorded in all six layers distinguished in the trial pits dug on the Late Neolithic site coded MG 4. In the uppermost layers, animal bones belonging to small and big ruminants, as well as birds strongly preponderate. The bones are frequently quite pulverized. Curiously enough, the mollusks from the uppermost layers I-III were replaced by another species that is abundantly represented in layer IV.

The percentage of fish bones in the osteological assemblage was significantly incremental in the lowermost (oldest) layer VI (from 1% to 7% of the total). Bird and wild bovidae bones were similarly more abundant in the lower than the upper layers. Some mammal bones are discolored by fire (10-15% of all the bones).

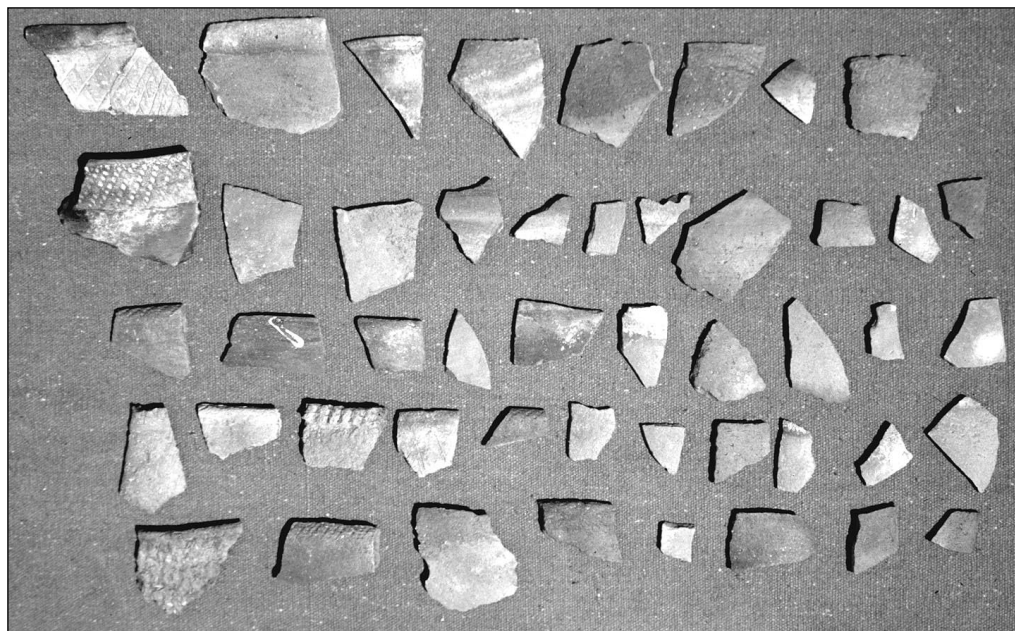


Fig. 5. Ceramic sample from the Kerma site near Selib (= SD 23)
(Photo B. Żurawski)

The Neolithic pottery from the SDRS has been analyzed by Dr. Marek Chłodnicki. Nearly half of the sites recorded contain early Khartoum-like pottery. The presence of wavy line and dotted wavy line pottery indicates a general contemporaneity with the earliest ceramic industries in the Sudan. The thin burnished, undecorated ceramics (with a "wolf-tooth" ornament registered on some sherds) suggest strong cultural links with the Late Neolithic of the Central Sudan, early A-Group and the so-called Karat Group attested on the western bank of the Nile.

During the first season, Dr. Jackie Phillips provisionally identified some potsherds as being of Kerma date.⁶⁾ All were found in the Hammur cluster, far in the desert. The majority appears to be mat-impressed, closed-shaped. These would-be Kerma sites were provisionally

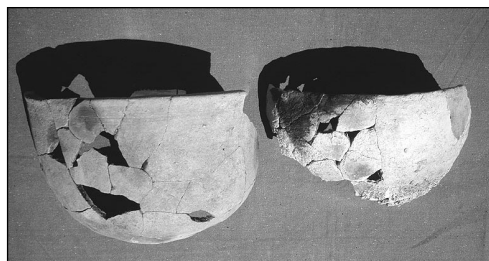


Fig. 6. Handmade bowls from a Proto-Kushite/Early Kushite site in the Argi Basin (= BTZ 33)
(Photo B. Żurawski)

identified as settlements or shelters. During the second season the very distinctive Kerma ceramics were found on two sites: SD 3 (N.18°08'59", E.30°50'59") and PO 19 (N.18°02'56", E.31°03'02") and so consequently in the Selib⁷⁾ (Fig. 5) and Abkur clusters. Terminal Kerma and Kerma-related (late) forms were recorded (mixed with Proto-Kushite/Early Kushite pottery) on a site coded BTZ 33 (N.18°07'05", E.30°55'55") and on a dozen or so other, usually multicultural sites.

The Proto-Kushite/Kushite horizon is represented by two important sites: BTZ 33 (Fig. 6) and Soniyat near Abkor. BTZ 33 is a huge site (c. 500 x 250 m) that occupies the banks of an ancient riverbed,⁸⁾ and disappears beneath the huge koms encircling the Argi Basin.⁹⁾

The location and dating of the BTZ 33 settlement site supports its association with the nearby Kushite(?) cemetery visited by Arkell in the forties: "*(...) some robbed graves perhaps 2 miles east of the Nile and not far west of the domed tomb (kubba) of Wad Idris, where fragments of pots, bronze awls, and a fragment of a scarab with a representation of a sphinx and Amen-Re and 'Menkheper(re)' in crude hieroglyphs (probably 25th Dynasty) were found, that had been left on the surface by the robbers*" (Khartoum Catalogue, no. 5123).¹⁰⁾ A disk-shaped clay object (SDRS 102/1999) found on BTZ 33 could be either a lip- or ear-plaque.

⁶⁾ J. Phillips, Southern Dongola Reach Survey 1998: A review of the ceramics and other finds. Acts of the Ninth International Conference of Nubian Studies held in Boston (August 21-26, 1998), forthcoming.

⁷⁾ There was a sort of "basin" near Selib within living memory. People used to say that the river flowed near the Christian enclosure some 100 years ago. Cf. unpublished Griffith Mss. kept in Griffith Institute (Oxford University), Envelope no. 1 file (no number, untitled) on "*Christian pottery fragments found on 20.03.1910 in Soleb (Merkaz Debba) from site of old church inside a frt. (=fortress?) with stone wall a metre thick: the Nile flowed past this spot less than 100 years ago (...)*". Needless to say, the Nile nowadays flows c. 1 km from the fortified enclosure at Selib.

⁸⁾ It may be joined to the Proto-Kushite/Kushite site (= BTZ 38, N. 18°07'06", E. 30°55'26").

⁹⁾ The recorded surface ceramics assemblages (multicultural) are strongly suggestive of important architectural units (Kushite?) being concealed beneath these mounds.

¹⁰⁾ A.J. Arkell, "Varia Sudanica", *JEA* 36 (1950), 35-36.

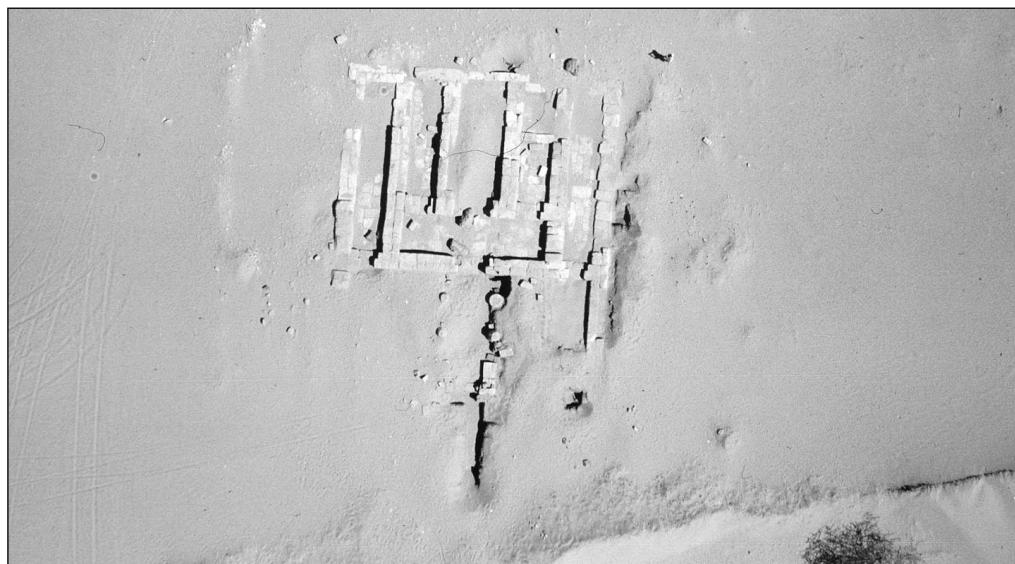
KUSHITE TEMPLE AT TERGEDUM (SONIJAT)

At Soniyat, the sand was cleared away from the northern part of the temple (thus exposing all of the sandstone pavement in the side corridors, the pronaos and both aisles of the naos).¹¹⁾ Trial pits dug in the southernmost part of the temple had revealed the sandstone pavement only in its middle section (*Fig. 7*). The remainder was found to be paved with mudbricks or made of tamped mud (*Fig. 8*). Door jambs were provided with separate sockets that were replaced once they had become worn out (drilled through by the revolving door beam). The pavement blocks were loosely set with no mortar to bond them as a rule, merely the bigger gaps being filled with mud. Lime mortar seems to have been used in the walls only to bond the super-

imposed blocks; stones in the same course are generally bonded with mud, although there are a few exceptions to this rule.

Rough dressing of the stones resulted in unevenness of the wall faces that had to be "trimmed" once the construction work had been finished. This was never done, in fact, because the temple was not completed. In one spot only the temple wall had been chiseled down and smoothed finely with stone abrasives(?). Significantly enough, this was the part of the outer wall of the pronaos situated exactly below the cache (the wall above the cache is not preserved) where the 148 oddly shaped stones (together with two bronze Osiris figures and a quartzite celt) had been found.¹²⁾

Some more fine examples of Napatan toreutics were found in a layer of compact



*Fig. 7. The Soniyat temple in February 1999. Bird's-eye view
(Photo B. Żurawski)*

¹¹⁾ Cf. PAM X, Reports 1998 (1999), fig. 4 on p. 154.

¹²⁾ Most of the stones were found in front of the cache.

sand above the pavement and in the gaps between the slabs. Among the twelve bronze Osiris figurines there was also a copper-alloy figurine of the Apis bull (*Fig. 9*) and an uraeus of the same material (SDRS 87/1999).

The identification of Soniyat with Tergedum mentioned in Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*¹³⁾ is beyond doubt.¹⁴⁾ Pliny's report says that Nero's centurions first saw the dog-faced baboons at Tergedum.¹⁵⁾ Since baboons live chiefly near rocky outcroppings, the barren isolated rocks near Abkur were an ideal habitat for them. The faience baboon figure found in the Soniyat temple is characterized by an authenticity unparalleled in Egyptian examples. It even

has the reddish-colored callosities on the buttocks rendered with appliqué of reddish faience (*Fig. 10*).

Among the votive objects made of terracotta there is a bizarre figurine representing a seated, bald-headed man with large, oblong eyes. Of definitely non-Egyptian origin, it is also unparalleled in the Napatan figurative art repertoire (*Fig. 11*).

The bread moulds with smoothed interior and finger-pressed (pinched into shape) exterior range from 6 to 8 cm in section. Their upper bodies tend toward a cylindrical profile, whereas the lower body tapers to a thick, pointed bottom. They belong to Type D (18th-19th Dynasties) and Type E in Helen Jacquet-Gordon's typology.¹⁶⁾



Fig. 8. The Soniyat temple after the 1998/1999 season (looking north)
(Photo B. Żurawski)

¹³⁾ Book VI, XXXV, 184-185 (ed. H. Rackham 1947).

¹⁴⁾ B. Żurawski, "Pliny's Tergedum discovered", *Sudan & Nubia*, Bulletin No. 2 (1998), 74-81.

¹⁵⁾ Tormond Eide in *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum* (III, 885) favors the spelling Tergedus instead of Tergedum.

¹⁶⁾ H. Jacquet-Gordon, "A tentative typology of Egyptian bread moulds" in: *Studien zur altägyptischen Keramik*, ed. D. Arnold (Mainz am Rhein 1981), 18, 20-24, figs 5, 6.

In the lowermost cultural layers in the southern part of the temple, there is a conspicuous share of imported Egyptian cream marl wares.

In the area adjoining the southern end of the temple the salty deposits are currently exploited by the Bedouins and the poorer inhabitants of Abkur (salt is added

to the bread and *kisra*). It is said that salt has been quarried in the temple surroundings since time immemorial. Could it be one of the reasons for founding the temple here? Salt mining apparently had an influence on the temple economy (other than the role played by salt in the temple rituals).

MEROITIC AND LATER SITES

The Meroitic period is represented in the survey area investigated so far only by two tiny wheel-made potsherds found in the pit dug in the southern (unexplored) part of the Soniyat temple (SDRS 84/1999 and SDRS 90/1999).

The post-Meroitic period was extensively tested during the 1998 season and now only one tumulus was excavated in a huge post-Meroitic tumuli field (c. 180 mounds) on either side of the road connecting Abkur

with Argi (some 1.5 km northeast of the Istabel fortress).¹⁷ It is one of the largest post-Meroitic funerary complexes in the Dongola Reach. Most tumuli have crater-like depressions at the top (suggestive of robbing). One tumulus excavated in 1999 revealed what the desert surface had looked like at the time of its construction. The deep cracking eternized beneath the grave mound was caused apparently by heavy rains falling shortly before the grave had been dug.

The investigated tumulus seems to have been robbed completely (at least twice), probably soon after the original interment. All that has been found is a single human bone, a beer-jar fragment and a piece of small hand-made bottle (H. 6 cm). The hypogeum was arranged in full conformity with the so-called Makurian type of two-chambered grave (attested in Hammur Abbasiya and in the Hamadab area).¹⁸

Among the Christian sites investigated in 1999, the Abkur/Tergis cluster deserves attention. A row of Christian sites linking the Soniyat temple with the Abkur fortress (Istabel) marks the course of the ancient riverbed.¹⁹ The settlement pat-

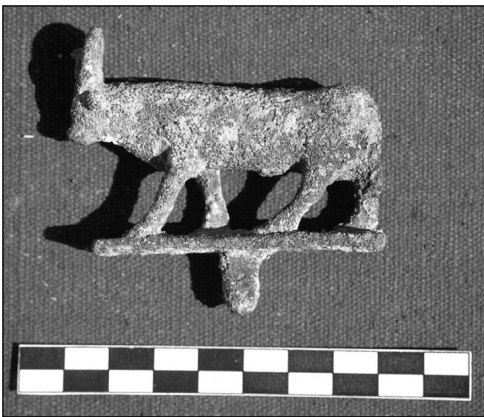


Fig. 9. *Apis bull*. SDRS 45/1999. Bronze. Found in the Soniyat temple (Room F) (Photo K. Kotlewski)

¹⁷ The excavations on post-Meroitic sites were supervised, as before, by Dr. Mahmoud El-Tayeb.

¹⁸ H. Paner, "The Hamadab Dam Project. Preliminary report on results from work in the Fourth Cataract Region 1996-1997", *African Reports*, I, 1998, 117, Fig. 3.

¹⁹ It is said that the river entered its ancient bed in 1914. In 1998 the high Nile flood submerged part of the ancient riverbed. The furthestmost inland point reached by the Nile in 1998 was N. 18°01'46", E. 31°05'18".

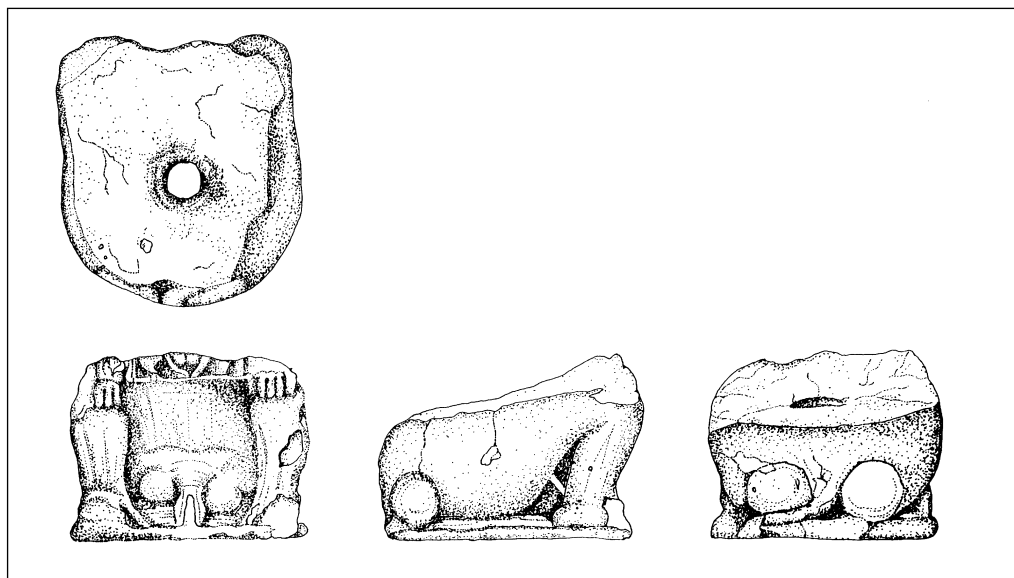


Fig. 10. Figurine of a squatting baboon (lower part). SDRS 93/1999. Faience. H. 4.7 cm, W. (max) 5.9 cm. Found in the Soniyat Temple (test trench 99/1) (Drawing A. Błaszczyk)

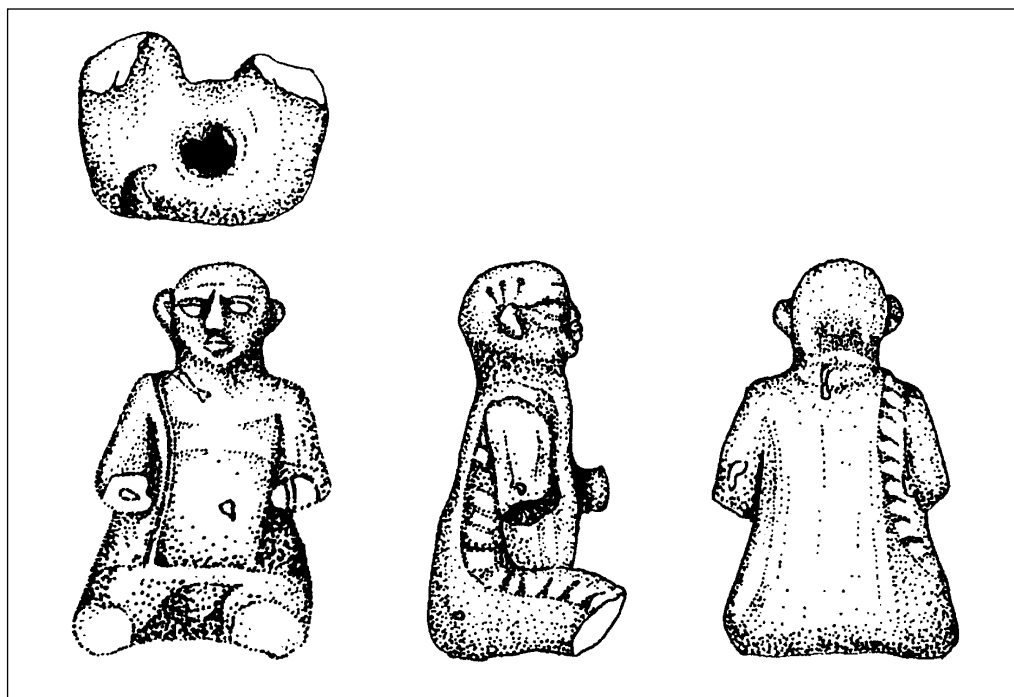
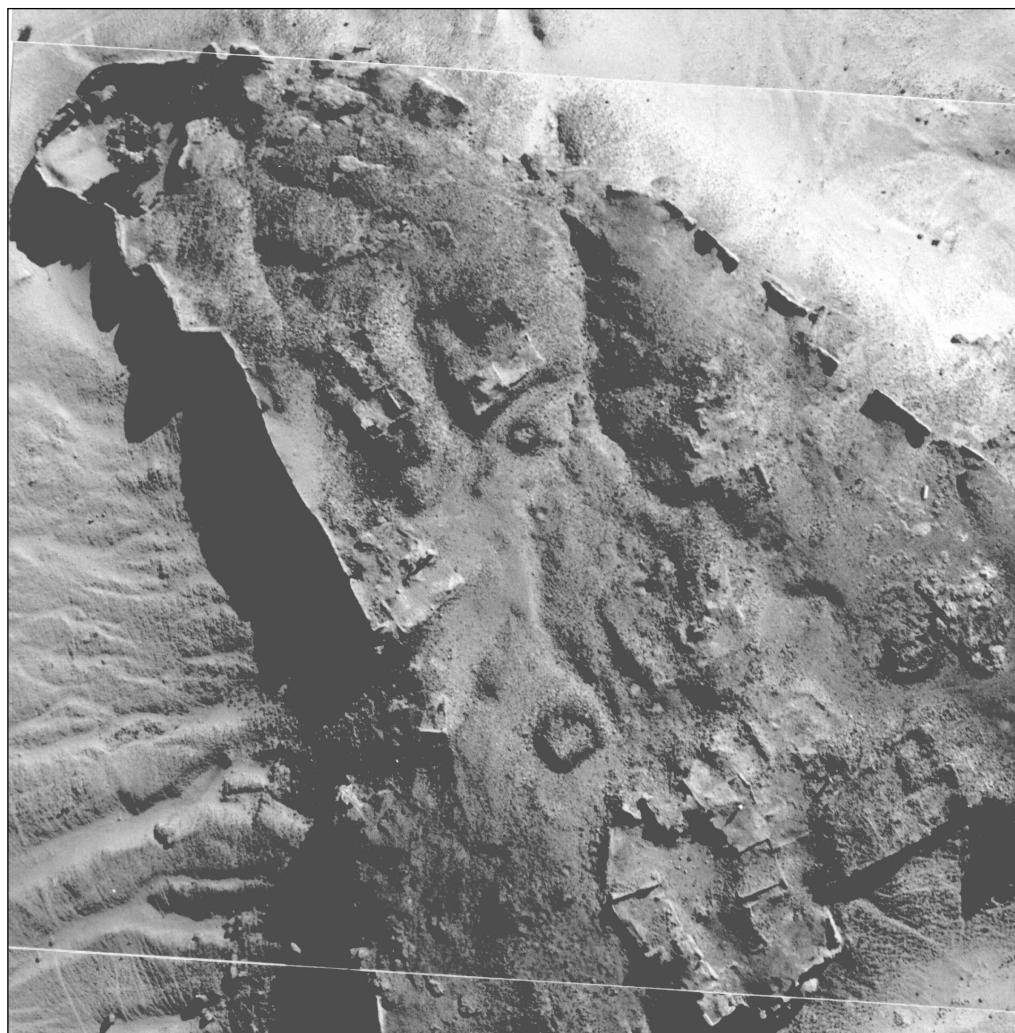


Fig. 11. Figurine of a seated man. SDRS 89/1999. Egyptian red, glazed. Found in the Soniyat temple (test trench 99/1). H. 4.4 cm, W. (max) 2.7 cm. (Drawing A. Błaszczyk and P. Osypiński)

tern here is quite dense. Christian sites with a conspicuous scatter of Early Christian ceramics on the surface include one (BTZ 61 = N.18°02'07", E.31°05'20") that is characterized by considerable overall dimensions (c. 200 x 150 m) and

thickness of the walls.²⁰⁾ The neighboring kom (N.18°02'17", E.31°05'07") features similar dimensions.

The Christian stronghold of Abkur was measured and photographed from the air in February 1999. A comparison of recent



*Fig. 12. Abkur fortress (Istabel). Bird's-eye view
(Photo B. Żurawski)*

²⁰⁾ The nearness of the Istabel fortress, less than two kilometers away, precludes the identification of BTZ 61 with a stronghold.

aerial photographs with air pictures taken in 1954 from a Sudan Survey Department plane clearly demonstrates that the modern village of Abkur is quite recent. The region seems to have been deserted after the fortress was abandoned as a result of sand dunes blocking the Nile channel here.²¹⁾ This explains the remarkable state of repair, as compared to other Christian strongholds in the region, of the Istabel fortress that was little affected by anthropogenic factors (there was virtually no *maroq*-digging there).

The site of the fortress church has been duly localized. It was erected on an elevated spot (like the church in the Ed-Deiga fortress). The spot is marked by a dense scatter of crushed red-bricks and hard exterior lime-plaster. The girdele walls, the oldest sections of which had been built of stones bonded in mud mortar, had been repaired with mudbricks (*Fig. 12*).

Another fortress site surveyed in 1999 was Ed-Diffar. To judge by the surface ceramics assemblage, the fortress seems to

have been inhabited in the Early Christian period, and then again in terminal Christian and Islamic times.

Apart from Girra and Buros, the Nile islands were not visited during the 1998/1999 season. However, two huge pillars (N. 18°07'52", E. 30°48'57") rising from the river between Buros Island and the left bank of the Nile, were measured and investigated. On December 30, 1998, they were found to protrude 250 cm above the water. The pillars, first seen and described by Edouard de Cadalvene and J. De Breuvéry in 1831,²²⁾ are built of well-fired bricks (16.5 x 33 x 8 cm) bonded in hard lime mortar and plastered (with the same mortar heavily mixed with crushed bricks). Both pillars are of equal length (c. 9 m). The outer pillar is 194 cm wide, the inner one (situated closer to the island) is only 100 cm in width. The two are 160 cm distant from each other. In the outer of the pillars there are stairs (60 cm wide), leading down to the river. The search for other pillars by a professional diver proved futile.

²¹⁾ It happened already after Evliya Celebi visited the site in 1673 but before Lord Prudhoe witnessed the river being "a mile distant" (from the fortress) in 1829.

²²⁾ Ed. de Cadalvéne et J. de Breuvéry, *L'Égypte et La Turquie de 1829 a 1836* (Paris 1836), 305.