

Beyond the Nile: new archaeological research in Sudan and South Sudan

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Archaeology in Sudan has entered an extremely active phase, one which hopefully will continue transforming the way archaeology is conducted in this part of Africa, as well as continuing to break methodological blindfolds strangely hanging over from the past. There are substantial growing pains and it is in this knowledge and against this backdrop that the idea for this special issue was born. With Jane Humphris — who works at Meroe — taking over as Director of the British Institute in Eastern Africa, it also seemed to us more generally a good moment to highlight new archaeological work in Sudan in the pages of *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa*.

Fourteen years on from David Edwards (2005: x) stating that a ‘new “Sudanese” archaeology is struggling to emerge [as] it has traditionally tended to be quite introspective and isolated from archaeologies elsewhere, not least from other fields of African archaeology’, the situation has marginally improved, but serious deficiencies remain. As before, there has still been little engagement by archaeologists working in the Middle Nile Valley with broader African archaeology, with those few doing so the exception rather than the rule. The potential contribution of Sudan to African archaeology as a whole therefore remains largely ignored and unexplored. The generation of active archaeologists from the generation of the last High Dam campaign in the 1960s has retired and, while a new generation has emerged, familiar problems remain. Employment can be temporary or possible only on short-term contracts and funding is challenging, echoing a wider issue in modern social science academia, while Nubian archaeology remains an adjunct to Egyptology in most universities.

However, much archaeological work has been undertaken in the past decade in Sudan and the areas surrounding it beyond the confines of the ‘protohistoric’ Nubian kingdoms (Kerma *c.* 2500–1500 BC, the Napatan state *c.* 800–300 BC and the Meroitic state *c.* 300 BC – AD 350). There has also been a shift in focus from major sites toward encompassing a broader range of themes such as the UCL Qatar metallurgy mission at Meroe (Humphries *et al.* 2018), the Czech mission at Sabaloka by Khartoum (Suková and Cilek 2012), the El Salha project at Al Khiday south of Khartoum (Salvatori 2012, Usai *et al.* 2014) and numerous other projects further north, together with Welsby’s (2001) pioneering earlier survey of the desert edge in the Nile’s northern Dongola Reach. Meaningful dialogues have been and are continuing to be established with other disciplines from the so-called hard and soft sciences. Most importantly, local communities are being actively involved in some — though unfortunately not always all — projects and are taking ownership of their histories. Provided that the political realities on the ground are conducive, the region undoubtedly has the potential to help transform our understanding of social structures, economic evolution, faunal domestication, environmental adaptations and inter-regional connectivity within African archaeology.

When planning this issue, the safe option would have been to put out a call for papers inclusive of the Sudanese Nile Valley. Instead, as most of the archaeology in Sudan is Nile-focused, we decided to look at sites or regions within the boundaries of modern-day Sudan or South Sudan

which were not along the main Nile River. This has provided contributors with the opportunity to turn the concepts of 'archaeology of the frontier' or 'periphery' on their head and to examine the lives and interactions of these communities in their own right.

This collection therefore presents material narratives from the regions south of Khartoum and from the Red Sea, the Sudanese Eastern Desert and South Sudan, as well as looking at interactions between the Middle Nile Valley and neighbouring communities. It presents not just details of the latest research in those areas and pointers to future research opportunities, but also helps to inform notions of cultural identity and diversity, highlighting the enormous diversity inherent within the modern political boundaries of Sudan and South Sudan and the potential of both countries' archaeology for understanding early cereal cultivation and food practices. It thereby moves beyond a focus on settlements, cemeteries and monuments to consider powerful mechanisms for social change and forging identity that perhaps offer a sense of unity and opportunities for integration and diversification beyond traditional research boundaries.

The two sites of Jebel Moya and Al Kihday were frequently visited and occupied over thousands of years. They were relevant not just for mobile but also for semi-sedentary and, in the case of Mesolithic Al Kihday, sedentary communities. The paper by Brass *et al.* presents the human osteological, botanical and preliminary faunal analyses from the 2017 field season at Jebel Moya 250 km south of Khartoum in the southern Gezira Plain. New AMS dates on a newly excavated human skeleton, faunal and botanical remains revise the site's chronology. A longer, more continuous occupation is now recognised. The AMS date from the skeleton is the first demonstrable evidence that burial activity started at Jebel Moya earlier than the first millennium BC. Apart from giving new insights into environmental conditions of the Gezira Plain south of Khartoum, their paper critically shows that the integration of savanna herding and cultivation of domesticated sorghum was present by the mid-third millennium BC in the eastern Sahel.

Al Kihday (south of Omdurman along the White Nile) yielded the first remains of a Mesolithic village found south of Khartoum and the first Mesolithic settlement in the Sudan with a high degree of social complexity. This site is therefore one of the most important in the eastern Sahel, producing the first archaeological sequence for the Mesolithic of central Sudan. Through their meticulous excavations, Usai *et al.* document a transition from mobile to sedentary and followed by a return to more mobile behaviour, with increased diversification in subsistence strategies. Laqiya type pottery is described as occurring this far south from Wadi Howar and up to a thousand years earlier than previously thought, potential evidence for early inter-regional networks.

Matthews and Nowotnick take a different approach to focusing on a particular site and the insights that this can reveal. Following the pioneering pathway set by Randi Haaland in particular in Sudan, and building upon methodologies developed elsewhere, they look at non-élite culinary activities and how these may inform interactions and cultural transmission between the Nile Valley, neighbouring communities and more distant societies.

Adam draws upon data from his project to examine the early Medieval period of the Sudanese Red Sea Coast, focusing on the major ports of Suakin, Aydhab (Aidab) and Badi. His project is a multi-disciplinary endeavour involving landscape surveys, targeted excavations and oral history and incorporating the work of previous projects. It is an important contribution in a region that is little studied at present outside the ongoing work by Andrea Manzo's Italian

Archaeological Expedition to Eastern Sudan (IAEES). As Adam (2019: ***) states, ‘This is regretful, as this area was a crossroads between different communities and civilizations not just integrated within the later Indian Ocean trade network but potentially earlier during the Classic and Late Meroitic as a conduit with the Nilotic Meroitic state through into an already vibrant oceanic trade.’ The paper highlights the diversity of the material culture present in the region and examines structures and surveyed and excavated tumuli. With more field seasons planned, more data will emerge to illuminate how the coastal regions of the eastern Sudan were included in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade networks.

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Beldados’ work focuses on an earlier time period in eastern Sudan, as part of Andrea Manzo’s IAEES project. Pottery sherds were examined from periods spanning the fourth millennium BC to the mid-first millennium AD. The presence of *Setaria*, *Eleusine*, *Brachiaria*, *Phalaris*, *Paspalum* and *Panicum* in eastern Sudan is confirmed, while wild sorghum was present in sherds from the earliest period (the Butana Group). Millets are also hugely important to the diet of modern inhabitants of the region and are especially used in times of food shortages, although more research has been directed at the origins of the Near Eastern winter rainfall crops wheat and barley. More detailed archaeobotanical and ethnoarchaeological analyses are needed to raise the awareness of the contribution of these foods in the evolution of early cultivation activities (cf. Lancelotti *et al.* 2019).

Finally, Kay *et al.*’s paper is a timely reminder not to dismiss the archaeology of South Sudan, notwithstanding current difficulties in undertaking fieldwork there. It pulls together the known data, which serves to bring to the fore the potential this region’s archaeology will hold once the political situation stabilises. Findings to its north, as well as to its southeast in Ethiopia and Kenya, on early pastoralism, funerary archaeology and metallurgy all illustrate that the South Sudan remains a largely unknown — but likely hugely important — entity. Drawing together past research and more recent work by Paul Lane and Matthew Davies (one of its co-authors), this paper is timely and encompasses some 4500 years from c. 3000 BC up until AD 1500. In undertaking future research here, and in Sudan itself, there is a fantastic opportunity to involve local communities from the outset, to avoid reproducing the Egyptological mindset that has plagued Sudanese archaeology for too long and to situate the region’s archaeology within wider Sahelian and Sub-Saharan settings. This opportunity for a multivocal approach driven by African agendas should be seized.

While not diminishing the importance of Nilotic civilisations, the papers in this issue of *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* therefore form the backdrop to a call for an increased focus on societies and communities outside the Nilotic Valley and for a recognition that they stand in their own right inside of merely serving as bit-players to dramas occurring along the main valley of the Nile.

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