

University of Naples “L’Orientale”
Italian Archaeological Expedition to the Eastern Sudan

Preliminary Report of the 2013 Field Season

by Andrea Manzo

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Introduction

According to the application submitted to the NCAM, the goal of the 2013 field season of the Italian Archaeological Expedition to the Eastern Sudan of the University of Naples “L’Orientale”¹ was the continuation of the investigations at site UA 53 and the conduction of a closer investigation of the western sector of site K 1 (Mahal Teglinos), one of the major archaeological sites of Eastern Sudan already investigated by the archaeological expedition led by Rodolfo Fattovich from 1980 to 1995.

Both these tasks were regarded as urgent because UA 53 will be affected by the ongoing building of the new dams on the Atbara and Setit rivers and by the implementation of an agricultural scheme in the region between the Gash and the Atbara (Upper Atbara Agricultural Irrigated Scheme), while the western sector of K 1 (Mahal Teglinos) was affected by intense erosion due

¹ The field work took place from November 9 to December 9. The team in the field consisted of Andrea Manzo, archaeologist, director of the project and ceramic analyst (University of Naples “L’Orientale”), Alemseged Beldados Aleho, archaeobotanist (Addis Abab University), Giorgio Banti, linguist (University of Naples “L’Orientale”), Marco Barbarino, surface surveyor (University of Naples “L’Orientale”), Alessia Cesaro, assistant archaeologist (University of Naples “L’Orientale”), Gilda Ferrandino, archaeologist (University of Naples “L’Orientale”), Valentina Perna, ceramic analyst (University of Naples “L’Orientale”), and Vincenzo Zoppi, archaeologist, also in charge of the survey and GIS analyst (University of Naples “L’Orientale”). The colleague representing NCAM was Habab Idriss Ahmed.

to the heavy rains of the last years. As the Expedition considered a priority to contribute to the cultural heritage management of the Kassala region these two endangered sites were selected for investigations in 2013. These sites could also be significant for the research project of the Expedition which is aimed at getting a better knowledge of the relationships between Eastern Sudan and Upper Nubia as well as to investigate the possible relationships between the cultures of Eastern Sudan and the Red Sea coast *via* the Eastern Desert (see the research project attached to the application), as both of them already contributed to the study of this topics (see our reports of 2010 and 2011). Moreover, starting from this year, linguistic investigations were started on the Nara language as a part of a larger program focusing on the Northern East-Sudanic branch of the Nilo-Saharan linguistic family (see the specific report by Giorgio Banti). These linguistic studies should be regarded as tightly related to the research project of the expedition, as C. Rilly recently suggested that Meroitic, a Northern East-Sudanic language, was already spoken in Upper Nubia in the 2nd millennium BC, and that the language closer to the Meroitic is the Nara, presently spoken in the Sudanese-Eritrean lowlands. Therefore, the existence of linguistic ties between Upper Nubia and Eastern Sudan possibly going back to ancient times can complement the archaeological reconstruction of the relationships between the two regions which is one of the tasks of our research project.

Investigations at K 1 (Mahal Teglinos)

K 1 (Mahal Teglinos) is a 10 ha. site located East of Kassala in a small valley in the northern part of the Jebel Taka complex. The site was investigated from 1980 to 1995 by the Italian Archaeological Mission to the Sudan (Kassala) (IAMSK) directed by Rodolfo Fattovich of the University of Naples "L'Orientale" (at that time Istituto Universitario Orientale). Previous investigations demonstrated that the site was used at least starting from the 4th millennium BC to the 1st millennium AD. The main occupation phases of the site date to the mid-3rd-2nd millennia BC. In Gash Group times (ca. mid-3rd-early 2nd millennium BC) a large settlement and a cemetery characterized by monolithic stelae, a so far unique funerary monument typical of this site, developed in the central and eastern part of the site. In Jebel Mokram Group times (early 2nd millennium BC-early 1st millennium AD) a smaller village was located the western sector of the site which was previously occupied by a small pond.

In 2012, during a visit to the site, it was remarked that erosion was bringing to light large sectors of a settlement in the northwestern part of the site as well as that some graves were cut and almost destroyed by streams in the same sector of the site. For this reason, this year three excavation units were investigated there: K 1 VII, VIII and IX.

K 1 VII was a 10x10 m excavation unit in the lower part of a sloping terrace, where some big chunks of burned clay and the remains of two possible human skeletons were visible on the surface. The big chunks of burned clay resulted to be part of a fireplace related to a living floor of a settlement area which was associated to Gash Group (mid-3rd-early 2nd millennium BC) archaeological materials. The remains of this settlement overlapped a dark gray to black soil very rich in organic remains possibly originated by the pound characterizing this sector of the site in the earliest times. One of the possible tombs resulted to consist of only few scattered flakes of bones, possibly animal, while the second one (K1 VII Tomb 1) consisted of a pit cut in the dark gray soil where a body in contracted position and with head oriented to South-East and facing North was placed. The pit of the tomb, whose upper part was destroyed by erosion, was cut in the lake sediment and in the Gash Group (mid-3rd-early 2nd millennium BC) layers, therefore it is later than that. This tomb can be compared with the others investigated in the past years at K 1 and may date to the 1st millennium AD. A sample of the bones will be submitted for C14 dating to confirm this suggestion.

K 1 VIII was a 4x4 m excavation unit investigated immediately upslope of K 1 VII. This excavation unit contained two concentrations of stones, marking possible graves endangered by erosion. After removing the stones just a single pit was visible. The pit was cut through a living floor of a settlement possibly related to the one investigated in nearby excavation unit K 1 VII. Nevertheless some Jebel Mokram Group (early 2nd millennium-mid-1st millennium BC) materials were collected in the soil filling the pit. The pit was also filled by several granitic stones under which a couple of oblique granite slabs were found. Nothing was found underneath except for some flakes of bones and a further stone slab. Therefore, most likely the grave was robbed, as was also remarked for other graves brought to light by erosion in the profile of a stream nearby whose robbing pit is very evident. Despite that no dating evidence was collected, also these tombs may go back to the 1st millennium AD.

K 1 IX was a 4x6 m excavation unit investigated south of the previous two where erosion brought to light big pieces of a large clay storage container reminding of the ethnographic

Nubian *gusseba*. Under a first stratum characterized by some Jebel Mokram Group (early 2nd millennium BC-early 1st millennium BC) materials, thick strata of burned soil and some stone arrangements were brought to light. They gave some charred seeds and were related to a living floor which could be ascribed to early 2nd millennium BC phases of the Gash Group on top of which also the big storage container was laying.

During fieldwork at K 1 Mahal Teglinos in the central part of the site a concentration of Egyptian Pharaonic sherds dating to Middle Kingdom times was remarked. According to the variety of their fabric, the sherds could be ascribed to at least four vessels (one of them a big jar, the others smaller bottles and flasks). The find spot is located downslope of the area where in 1993 some mud brick structures dating to the 2nd millennium BC phases of the Gash Group were investigated. In the same area in 1991 the largest collection of Egyptian Pharaonic pottery South of the 4th cataract was discovered. The discovery of 2013 confirms that this sector of the site may have had a specific function possibly related to the storage of goods exchanged in the long distance trade in the late phases of the Gash Group (early 2nd millennium BC). As erosion is endangering also this area, further fieldwork may be necessary there in the near future.

Finally, in a stream in the western sector of the site a round topped granite slab was collected. The slab was examined with a geologist and it was remarked not only that it was intentionally shaped and that one side of the slab was intentionally flattened, but also that it was characterized by some manmade horizontal lines. This may suggest that the slab if not inscribed, may have been intentionally prepared for this purpose. The fact that red marks due to the oxidation of the stone only occur on the flattened side of the slab suggests that that side was exposed for a long time. The rough surface of the other side of the slab may suggest that it was not intended to be seen and that the slab may have been placed in a niche.

Investigations at Site UA53

UA53 is site in the South-Western sector of the area endangered by the implementation of the Upper Atbara Agricultural Irrigation Scheme. As shown by investigation conducted in 2010 and 2011, the site was characterized by the presence of eroded tumulus or mounds possibly dating to Jebel Mokram Group times (2nd-early 1st millennium BC) in its central and northeastern sector, by the occurrence of some remains of a Jebel Mokram Group (2nd-early 1st millennium BC)

settlement with huts in the northern sector of the site, by concentrations of shells originating from Butana Group (4th-early 3rd millennium BC) assemblages in its Southern sector and by remains of a second later Gergaf Group (15th-18th century AD) settlement in its Southern sector. In 2011 a single grave was excavated in the eastern sector of the site which could represent a phase of use of the site intermediate between the Butana Group (4th millennium BC) and the Jebel Mokram Group (early 2nd-mid-1st millennium BC).

In 2013 it was decided to resume investigations at the site in order to collect more evidence on this still badly known phase of use of the site and for this reason more graves occurring in the central and southern sector of the site were excavated. Moreover, we also wanted to collect more data on the Butana Group (4th millennium BC) shell middens in order to conduct a study on the material culture associated to this specialized activity. Finally, further data on the latest occupation phases of the site were regarded as highly desirable. For these reasons seven excavation units were investigated: UA 53 XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI and XVII.

UA 53 XI is a 10x10 m excavation unit which was excavated in the southeastern part of the site where some remains associated to late (1st-2nd millennia AD) ceramics were visible as well as some remains of earlier shell middens brought to light by erosion. The occurrence of a Gergaf Group (early to mid-2nd millennium AD) occupation of the spot was confirmed and it was made evident that it immediately overlapped the earlier Butana Group (4th millennium BC) living floors characterized by concentration of shells ascribable to fresh water mollusks and land snails. Three concentrations of shells of two different phases were investigated in this excavation unit. The latest concentration consisted of a shallow pit filled by shells, pottery and lithics, the earliest middens were on an underlying living floor always ascribable to Butana Group times.

UA 53 XII, a 10x8 m excavation unit in the southern sector of the site was associated with some remains associated with Gergaf Group (early to mid-2nd millennium AD) materials. The occurrence of a late occupation of the spot and of remains of associated light structures was confirmed. Moreover, a tomb was discovered in the eastern part of the excavation unit. The tomb was earlier than the Gergaf Group and consisted of a pit, whose upper part was completely destroyed by erosion. The tomb contained a tightly contracted body with head to the East and facing North, whose skeleton was very badly damaged by erosion. Several green stone beads of the same type collected in the sector of the excavation unit where the tomb was located may have

been originally associated to it. The lower part of the pit of the tomb partially cut a living floor associated with Butana Group (4th millennium BC) lithic and ceramic materials.

UA 53 XIII, a 4x4 m excavation unit located in the area intermediate between the previous two trenches, was intended to investigate a tomb whose remains were brought to light by erosion. The tomb, consisted of a pit, whose upper part was completely destroyed by erosion, containing a body in tightly contracted position with head to the South and facing East. Two stone lip plugs were found associated to the body in the lower part of the pit. The pit was partially cutting a living floor on top of which a concentration of Butana Group (4th millennium BC) materials were laying.

UA 53 XIV, a 6x6 m excavation unit in the southern sector of the site, was intended to collect more data on the latest phases of occupation of the site as a concentration of late ceramics ascribable to the Hagiz (mid-1st millennium BC-1st millennium AD) and Gergaf Group (early to mid-2nd millennium AD) was remarked on the spot. This concentration of materials is characterized by the presence of several fitting and mending sherds with ancient fractures, and this suggests that they are almost in situ and they may have marked an activity area. In this spot for the first time the occurrence of Hagiz Group materials was noticed at UA 53. Underneath, in the southern part of the excavation unit, a tomb, whose upper part of the pit was completely eroded, was remarked. Also in this case, the skeleton was damaged by erosion, nevertheless it was possible to understand that the body was laying in tightly contracted position with the head to the East and facing North. A green stone bead was discovered in association with this tomb.

UA 53 XV is a 6x6 m excavation unit in the central part of the site and was intended to investigate two tombs brought to light by erosion. The easternmost one, Tomb 1, was characterized by a body in tightly contracted position, with the head to the West and facing North, the westernmost one, Tomb 2, consisted of a body in contracted position with head to the South and facing East. Some ostrich eggshell beads and a bag shaped red stone (carnelian ?) amulet were found associated to Tomb 2.

UA 53 XVI is a 4x6 m excavation unit East of UA 53 XV also characterized by a tomb with the body in contracted position. The head was oriented to the North facing West and the contracted legs were placed almost vertical. A spear-shaped lip plug was associated to this tomb.

UA 53 XVII is a 4x4 m excavation unit in the central sector of the site. Before the excavation, a shell midden and remains of a tomb were already visible on the surface. Thus, it was decided to

excavate at this spot in order to have a further confirmation of the stratigraphic relationship between the graves and the shell middens. A first tomb, Tomb 1, was discovered in the eastern part of the excavation unit. It was characterized by a body in contracted position with head to North-East and facing East. A disk shaped ostrich eggshell bead was found in association with Tomb 1. A second tomb, Tomb 2, was discovered across the western limit of the excavation unit. It was characterized by a body in tightly contracted position, with head to the North-West and facing East. Nine lip plugs were found in association with this tomb, some of them still in situ, close to the mouth. In both tombs, the upper part of the pit was completely destroyed by erosion. The preserved part of the pit was cut into a stratum which covered the shell midden visible also before excavating, in the eastern sector of the excavation unit, as well as a further shell midden made evident by the excavation in the south-western part of the trench. Only the first shell midden was investigated and it demonstrated to lay on top of a living floor. Both the living floor and the shell midden itself gave materials of the Butana Group (4th millennium BC).

While investigating site UA 53 some objects were collected on the surface of the site. Two more stone cylinders similar to the ones collected in 2011 and 2012 and interpreted as possible weights were collected. In the northern sector of the site, in the area of the Jebel Mokram Group (early 2nd-early 1st millennium BC) settlement a clay animal figurine possibly representing a cow was collected.

Survey

A visit to the site JAG (Jebel Abu Gamal) 1 was conducted to assess the state of preservation of the site, ca. 10 ha. in area. JAG 1, a multiphase site with Gash Group (mid-3rd-early 2nd millennium BC), Jebel Mokram Group (early 2nd-early 1st millennium BC) and later occupation phases, resulted to be quite undisturbed and the tumulus which were recorded in the Eighties on its surface still visible. The site will deserve future investigation. During our visit a fragmentary clay female figurine was collected in the central part the site.

Also site UA 14, the largest Butana Group (4th millennium BC) site in the region was revisited in order to explore the possibility of conducting some excavation there in the next field season. The state of preservation of UA 14 did not change since our last visit and after the assessment of the tracks leading to the site, its exploration seems possible.

Site UA 129, near the Kassala-Port Sudan paved road, few kilometers North of Kassala, was revisited as well. This Hagiz Group (mid-1st millennium BC-1st millennium AD) site is characterized both by a settlement area with remains of red bricks and a concentration of burned and ashy material, and a perhaps by a contemporary cemetery in its northern sector. Despite the fact the site is located in a cultivated area, the settlement area resulted to be suitable for future investigation, which should be considered as a priority, as the site is endangered by the agricultural exploitation of the area. On the contrary, the cemetery may have been already destroyed, as most of the bones lay scattered in thin pieces on the surface.

In the last day of the field season the site of K 5, near the Kahtmyia mosque, East of Kassala was visited as well. Unfortunately, the site, dated to the mid-1st millennium BC on the basis of the material collected on its surface in the Eighties and of the materials given by the excavations conducted there in 1993, resulted to be completely destroyed by the modern Islamic cemetery. On the contrary, a site further South at the foot of the Jebel Taka always characterized by 1st millennium AD materials and perhaps to be identified with one of the sites surveyed in the Eighties, resulted to be still preserved bit with a thin stratification.

On request of the Regional Government, a site near the town of Aroma was visited as well. It resulted to be a multicomponent site, characterized both by domestic areas with concentrations of pottery and red bricks, and by soil mounds marking the presence of tombs. According to local informants, the tombs are characterized by a vertical pit and side chambers closed by walls of bricks. The pottery collected on the surface of this site can be ascribed both to the Hagiz Group (mid-1st millennium BC-1st millennium AD) and to the Gergaf Group (early to mid-2nd millennium AD). The site is suitable for future investigation which should be regarded as a priority both because it may enlarge our limited knowledge of the late phases of the peopling of the region and because it is endangered by the agricultural exploitation of the area and by an expanding Islamic cemetery.

In 2013 a third visit to the Jebel Maman early Islamic site was conducted as well. The visit was aimed at verifying the perimeter of the site and at starting the study of the distribution of the different types of structures inside the site. It was remarked that in the northern sector of the site no *qubba* structures occur but only circles of stones and badly eroded tumulus. In the same area “U” shaped structures, possibly shelters, were registered as well. In the southern part of the site, it was remarked that the more complex *qubba* structures consisting of two superimposed cubic

stone structures mainly occur on the eastern side of the jebel, while the simpler *qubba* structures consisting of a single cubic structure concentrate on the western side. In the middle the two types are mixed, and in this sector also a cluster of small monolithic stelae occurs. On the eastern side of the jebel some tumulus and possibly not associated small monolithic stelae were remarked as well. Moreover, the presence of some possible clusters of *qubba* was remarked and this may result to be meaningful for the understanding of the development of the cemetery. Finally, it was remarked that at the base of a jebel to the East of Jebel Maman other structures, possibly a further cemetery with *qubba*, can be observed from the site. The presence of a second cemetery with Islamic remains in the area will be verified in the next future.

Archaeobotanical studies

Archaeobotanical preliminary investigation was conducted on samples from the 2012 and 2013 field season in the laboratory of the National Museum of Khartoum. The seeds, soil samples and the vegetal tempered sherds are examined at various levels first using a magnifier Lamp, model No.: 8066, AC 230V 50 HZ 22 W, bulb type: 22W G10q. For further investigation of the samples, a high power Stereo microscope (input rating: 230V-/50HZ, 35W) was used.

The following identification were made:

K1 IX E2 SU2 2013 Top of SU 5, samples of walls of storage container: mineralized impressions of Sorghum cf. bicolor, wild morphotype and carbonized grains, chaffs and spikelets of wild Sorghum cf. bicolor, and Hordeum sp. Cultural affiliation of the context: Gash Group (mid-3rd-early 2nd millennium BC).

UA 53 VII 2012, B2-3, SU-6, sample of baked clay: imprints of domesticated Sorghum cf. bicolor. Cultural affiliation of the context: Jebel Mokram Group (early 2nd-mid-1st millennium BC).

UA 53 VII 2012, B2-B6 SU6, sample of baked clay: carbonized grains of millet sp., Lolium sp. and of Eleusine sp. Cultural affiliation of the context: Jebel Mokram Group (early 2nd-mid-1st millennium BC).

UA 53 X 2012, B2 SU4, sample of baked clay: chaffs and spikeletes of Sorghum sp. Cultural affiliation of the context: Butana Group (4th millennium BC).

UA 53 X, 2012 B2, SU12, sample of baked clay: chaffs and spikeletes belonging to the Gramineae family. Cultural affiliation of the context: Butana Group (4th millennium BC).

UA 126 N E.U. II (Fire Place), sampled of baked clay: two carbonized grains of Sorghum sp. and other two as belonging to millet sp. Cultural affiliation of the context: Hagiz Group (mid-1st millennium BC-1st millennium AD).

Final remarks

Excavations at Mahal Teglinos demonstrated to be very fruitful because, as shown by the results of the archaeobotanical investigations, they considerably enriched our knowledge of the subsistence strategies of the Gash Group (mid 3rd-early 2nd millennia BC) while the discovery of a new concentration of Egyptian Pharaonic ceramic materials added further elements to fully appreciate the participation of Eastern Sudan to the inter-regional networks in the early 2nd millennium BC. Also the discovery of the round topped slab possibly prepared to be inscribed confirms the importance of Mahal Teglinos in the 2nd mill. BC, as it may represent the southernmost evidence of writing in Africa for that period. Moreover, the fact that a Gash Group settlement directly overlapped the lake sediments characterizing the western sector of the site shows that the pond in that part of the site started drying before the time it was so far thought to do. Actually, it was previously thought that the pond was dried only in Jebel Mokram Group times (early 2nd-mid-1st millennium BC), while it is now clear that this was only the end of a process started in Gash Group times, at least around 2000 BC, when the northern part of the pond was already dried up as a local consequence of the more general climatic changes affecting the whole northeastern Africa in the second part of the Holocene.

Investigations at UA 53 enlarged our collection of ceramic and lithic artifacts directly related to the intensive exploitation of fresh water mollusks and land snails, which will enlarge our knowledge on this kind of specialized subsistence activity. Of course, this activity was possible in environmental setting more humid than the present one, when pedogenetic processes were still active. The subsequent phase of severe wind erosion proven by the fact that the both the 4th millennium BC shell middens and the later tombs extensively investigated this year lay together on the present surface may be related to the more arid conditions progressively emerging and

still continuing today in the whole region after mid-Holocene. Moreover, the completion of analysis of samples from UA 53 confirmed the occurrence of domesticated sorghum in Jebel Mokram Group times (early 2nd-mid-1st millennium BC). Finally a larger evidence for the latest phases of use of the site dating to Gergaf Group (early to mid-2nd millennium AD) and, as shown for the first time this year, to Hagiz Group (mid-1st millennium BC-1st millennium AD) times, was collected.

As far as the linguistic studies are concerned, they promise to offer new stimulating data to conduct a combined study of the archaeological, historical and linguistic evidence on the relationships between Upper Nubia and Eastern Sudan in ancient times.

Finally the survey pointed out some site which may be considered for investigation in the further steps of the project.

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