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## A SURVEY NORTH OF THE FOURTH CATARACT

In 1985 a group of Swedish technicians appeared at Karima, and we were told they had to inquire about a feasibility project concerning a dam on the Nile in the region of the Fourth Cataract. The Mission of the University of Rome was at that time the only archaeological team present, and we felt in a way responsible for giving some sort of alarm about this project, which, if put into realisation, would effect the archaeological destiny of the area.

The simplest and most effective way to achieve a result seemed us to give an example and to ask the archaeological authorities of the Sudan for permission of surveying – almost symbolically – the first island of that region and its immediate surroundings, in order to raise the problem of the „Salvage of the Fourth Cataract Antiquities“.

If the idea and the terminology are borrowed from the Nubian Salvage Campaign, which has proved one of the most impressive and effective archaeological enterprises of this century, the practical problems involved and the results expected are radically (and happily) incomparable. No major buildings are to be recorded, no transfer of monuments is needed. But this rather unknown region preserves certainly aspects of the Sudanese history which are worth being studied and preserved.

In this spirit we proposed a common work to the Humboldt University, with which we had since long been cooperating, and PROF. WENIG was expected to join the campaign. We presented therefore our request to the Sudanese Antiquities Department, and its Commissioner at that time, SAYED OKASHA, eagerly accepted our proposal and promised his help.

We decided therefore to experience a preliminary investigation about the possibility of life and research work in the region, which was planned in connection with our yearly campaign at Jebel Barkal in 1987. Reasons independent from his will prevented at the last moment the participation of PROF. WENIG, and the expedition was limited to the people of the Mission of Rome University already active at Karima, completed by a prehistorian, DR. ISABELLA CANEVA, and a

scholar responsible for Christian Nubian antiquities, DR. ANNA ROVERI. To the group has proved invaluable the collaboration of our Sudanese Inspector, SAYED MOHAMMED EL AMIR BABIKER, who has made easy and fruitful our connections with the rare and particularly friendly people of the region.

This first attempt of a survey remained without a real continuation. The UNESCO was interested by the Sudanese Authorities, and in expectation of a general preliminary inspection and of an operative general project, specific and single activities in the region have been to be considered untimely. All we could do in the following years was to inspect some monuments in the proximity of Karima which may be connected or compared with those of the Cataract. This chronicle is necessary to evaluate the limits and the character of our survey, which strictly excluded any digging.

As a cartographical basis we had the beautiful – but somewhat old – map of the Geographical Survey of 1933, revised in 1975, to which we could add an aerial photograph which had been kindly offered to us by the *maglis* of Karima. As it was expected, coastlines and islands, and everything connected with the river, may change their shape at every flood, and so we preferred to trace a schematic profile-drawing of the area, on which we could situate in a preliminary way the results of our observations. We limited our programme to the survey of the first (or last, according to the direction of the Nile) significant island of the Cataract, ULI, and of the two banks of the river facing it (fig.1).

Reaching our planned basis by boat soon proved to be impossible: the Nile there is broken by rocky banks, often concealed under some water flowing over them. We could reach by track a hamlet in front of the island of ULI, called HAJAR SAI, and there we put our headquarter in the *diwân* of a large house. The landlord was absent: but we were assured that he would have been pleased of being our host. And actually such was the case.

The region in which we were to move had a very simple and peculiar landscape: the hills at

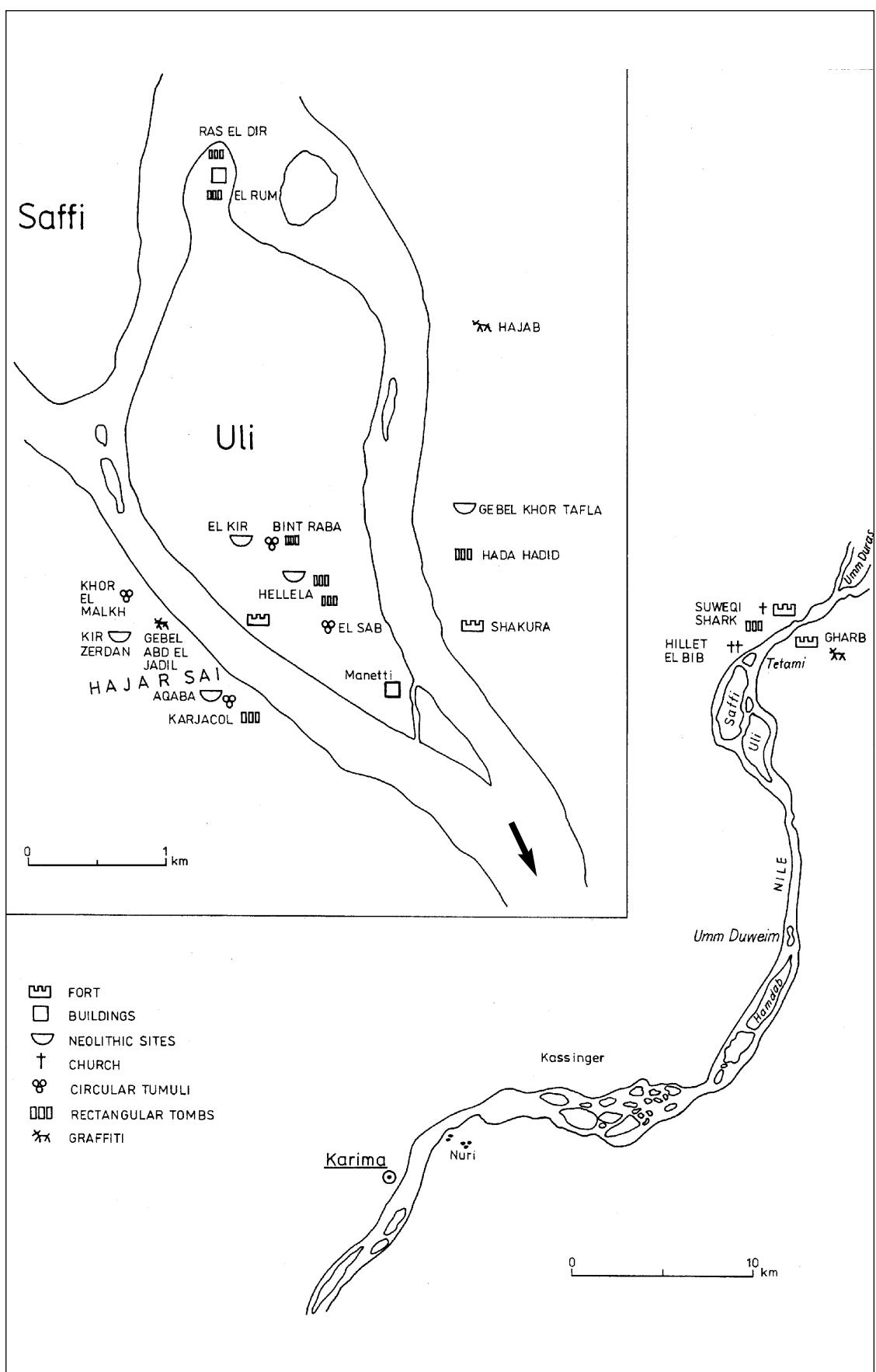


Fig. 1: Sketch map of ULI Island and of the Fourth Cataract Region



Fig. 2: Circular tombs at BINT RABA



Fig. 3: Tombs near EL SAB

some distance from the Nile limit a rather narrow sandy plain, and the islands are formed by accumulations of granite blocks, connected by sand, on which the flood deposits some fertile soil. Dates and *kamûn* are the products of an agricultural activity on small fields, and this excludes the formation of real villages: dwellings are rather frequent, but rather independent from each other.

A last thing must be put in evidence and remembered for future work in the area: the extreme specialisation of toponymastics. In the limits of few tens of metres we observed particular denominations for the eastern and the western sub-area. Such is the case, for instance, of a spot north of HAJAR SAI, where GEBEL ABD EL-JADIL, KIR ZERDAN, KHOR EL-MALKH are all within a space which appears to us as a topographical unit. It is therefore advisable to refrain from amplifying the value of a specific place name to the neighbouring region before checking its actual use.

Within this general frame we may try to trace some specific results of our observations.

The prehistorian of the group, DR. CANEVA, could collect microliths scattered all around the granite blocks in the island, at HELLELA, BINT RABA, EL KIR, and on the right bank at AQABA and KIR ZERDAN. However it is only in this last site where it was possible to identify remains of a permanent settlement and not

only occasional frequmentation as it appears everywhere else.

Apart from that, all over the region we were confronted with funerary remains. Circular tombs are at BINT RABA (fig. 2), roughly in the middle of the island, at EL SAB (fig. 3) in the South and at KHOR EL-MALKH on the right side of the river. In this last case, a first group of four *tumuli* shows only the central heap of stones, measuring about 2,50 m in diameter, covered with pebbles which, in one instance, are of two different kinds: a layer of bigger ones is covered with others, smaller and naturally polished (the so-called *khorassan*). A second group, a little further north, shows 5 or 6 similar structures, still retaining the outer circular ring, whose diameter measures from 4 to 7 m.

Quite different is the case of AQABA (fig. 4) – on the same bank – where a sandy space contains in its middle a lot of stone circles, touching each other (diameter of about 2 m) still showing the *khorassan* of their original decoration, and some fragments of rough pottery. As for the two cases recorded on the island, EL SAB has shown about 15 remains of *tumuli*, much of them destroyed. A ring of stones, about 1,5 m thick, encloses spaces between 3,50 to 4,50 m in diameter, at the centre of which are bigger stone circles, to block the tomb. Some potsherds could be collected here, mostly not specifically cha-



Fig. 4: Circular tomb at AQABA



Fig. 5: Rings of stones at BINT RABA

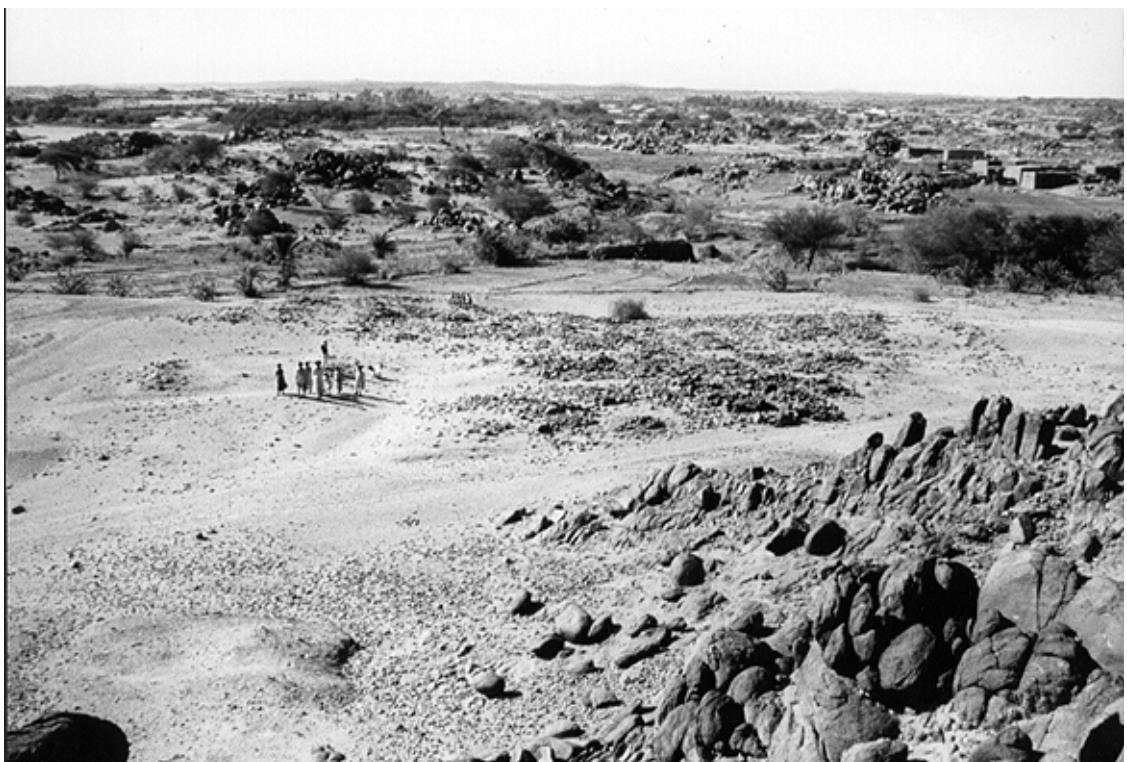


Fig. 6: Cemetery at EL RUM

racterized, but which in some cases appear to be „Late Christian“ according to the classification of Adams.

At BINT RABA, in the north (fig. 5), in an archaeological landscape of which we will further speak, there are at least five big stone rings, about 2 m wide, contiguous to another group of a quite different type: there we numbered about 15 tombs, rectangular and oriented east-west, built of small blocks of natural granite, on which the usual *khorassan* has been spread to fill the empty spaces within the structures. Their average measure is 2,80 by 1 m, while a certain number of smaller monuments was apparently reserved for children.

A similarly full packed cemetery of rectangular tombs (25 of them) not so well preserved but analogous in typology, is at KARJAKOL, on the right bank, not far from the circular tombs of AQABA: such a density of depositions may be an indication for a relatively populous centre in the vicinity, and their differentiation shows perhaps some social stratification.

This may better and more fully appear from another case: the cemetery of EL RUM (fig. 6), at the northern top of the island. The tombs there consist of big blocks of granite designing a rectangular frame, with a central *spina* of the same material. Here too, smaller structures are probably reserved for younger people. The measures

concerning their length are not standard (from 2 to 2,50 m, or even more) while they are rather constant (1 m) in width.

The whole cemetery is divided in two sections, one north and the other south by a path empty of depositions (fig. 7). The northern sector contains about 30 tombs on an area of 20 x 12 m<sup>2</sup>, the southern one about 60 on an area of 50 x 30 m<sup>2</sup>: the difference is considerable and can be even stressed by the fact that in the northern section of the cemetery the granite blocks employed to form the basis of the tomb are much bigger – and therefore also better preserved – than in the southern section.

Funerary remains are certainly those which, by their own nature, are specifically conceived to resist the attacks of time, while on the contrary everyday buildings are easily subject to many occasions of destruction. No wonder if in this respect the local archaeology is rather flimsy.

The natives showed us a building in Manetti that they considered ancient and worth visiting. As a matter of fact, it seemed certainly old in some of its parts, but subject to many alterations in different times, proved by the different types of masonry. Some of them employ regular brick beds, some in fish-bone pattern, some – as it is usual nowadays – employ simply *pisé*. If the building was not very attracting, a search for other remains all through the island has iden-



Fig. 7: Cemetery at EL RUM



Fig. 8: The Nile near RAS EL DIR



Fig. 9: General view of RAS EL DIR

tified only some scattered remains, some accumulations of potsherds, too scanty to be usefully studied in the absence of some excavation. If a grindstone appears at HELLELA near the traces of some mudbricks, the only interesting remains of a settlement are at RAS EL DIR, at the northern bottom of the island, and – as we have been told – often an island itself, when separated by the flood from the bigger one. The Nile is immediately near (fig. 8), but it is concealed by an accumulation of enormous granite blocks. Behind them and protected by them, evident and numerous traces of dwellings can be observed: foundation walls, walls in mudbricks, foundations in granite (fig. 9). We have chosen for documentation a square foundation divided into different rooms (fig. 10), but others have a circular plan and let suppose a conical roofing, others are probably testified only by some flattened portions of the rock, on which some sort of protection was put, just as the people still use.

Some tombs are in the settlement neighbourhood: but it may be assumed that the actual cemetery of the village is what we have already described at EL RUM, whose dimensions are so justified by this proximity to the inhabited centre.

I believe that here we are confronted with a model of settlement that we have already found near the Second Cataract: groups of rather elementary lodging are practically just on the Nile,

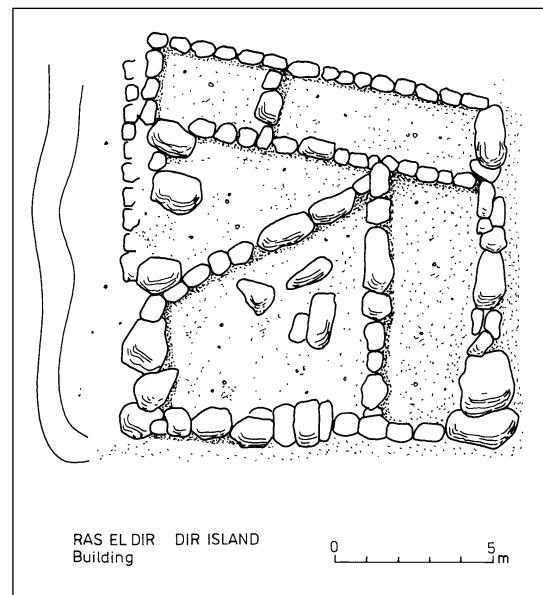


Fig. 10: Sketch of a building near RAS EL DIR

but they are squatting behind a girdle of granite rocks, unseen from the outside. At the same time they have easy possibilities of getting water from the river, of fishing, and also of cultivating some fields not so far away, to which the necessary water supply could be brought by means of spanning aqueducts of wooden pipes, just as we have observed on ULI.

All over the village site there are fragments of grindstones, and, more important for us, pot-

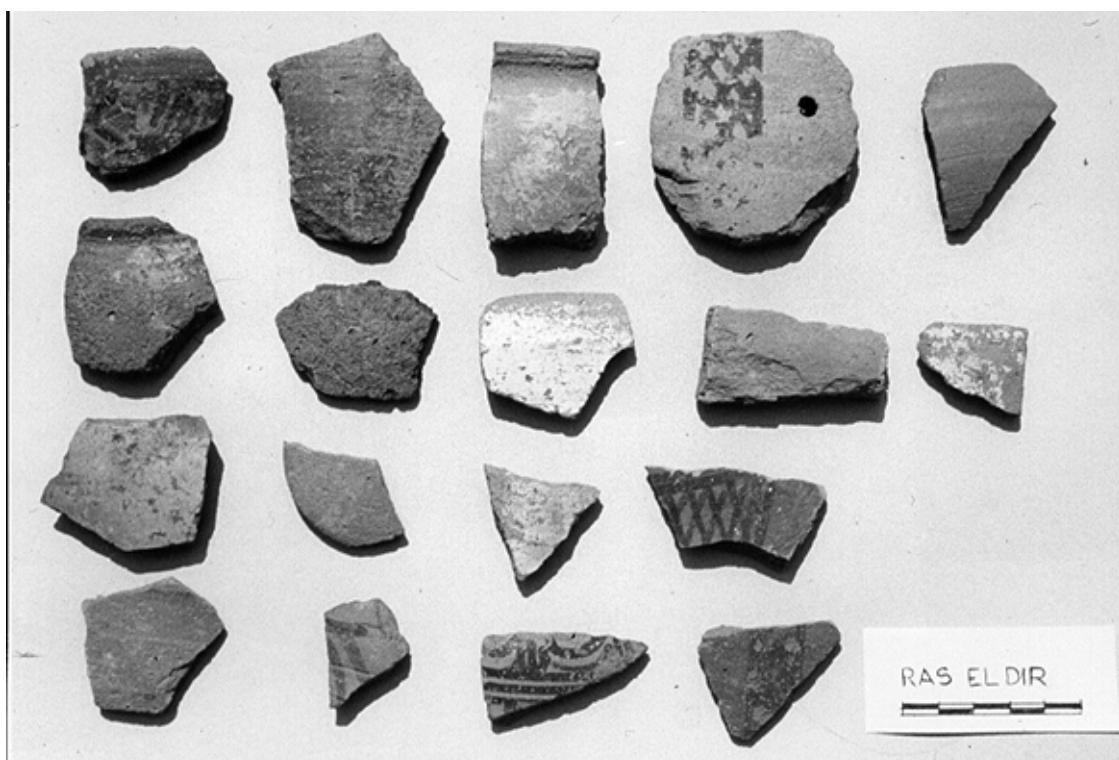


Fig. 11: Late Christian pottery from RAS EL DIR

sherds sufficiently characterized to suggest a dating to the „Late Christian“ (fig. 11).

The human impression one gets from these scanty remains is that of a society living in fear, trying to disappear in the landscape, although already protected by the difficult waters of the Nile.

A similar trend is apparent in some important structures of the bank we have visited, or revisited after earlier archaeologists or travellers. In front of the southern bottom of ULI, at SHAQURA on the left bank of the river, there are remains of a complex which has been shown to us by the natives, who also explained that a big part of it had been destroyed long ago. A building in mudbricks is preserved only in one of its corners for the height of about 7 m. The lower part of the wall is escarped, the upper part is provided with a range of loop-holes, each of them pointing in a slightly different direction (fig. 12). The experience of fire arms is evident, and we have therefore a *terminus post quem* in the 16th Century, when such weapons seem to have been introduced in the Sudan.

Of quite another importance are two other monuments which were marked in a list of sites kindly provided to us before our trip by Dr. Hinkel. They are situated a little outside the area we had planned to survey. These are the two forts that Titherington and the official map call

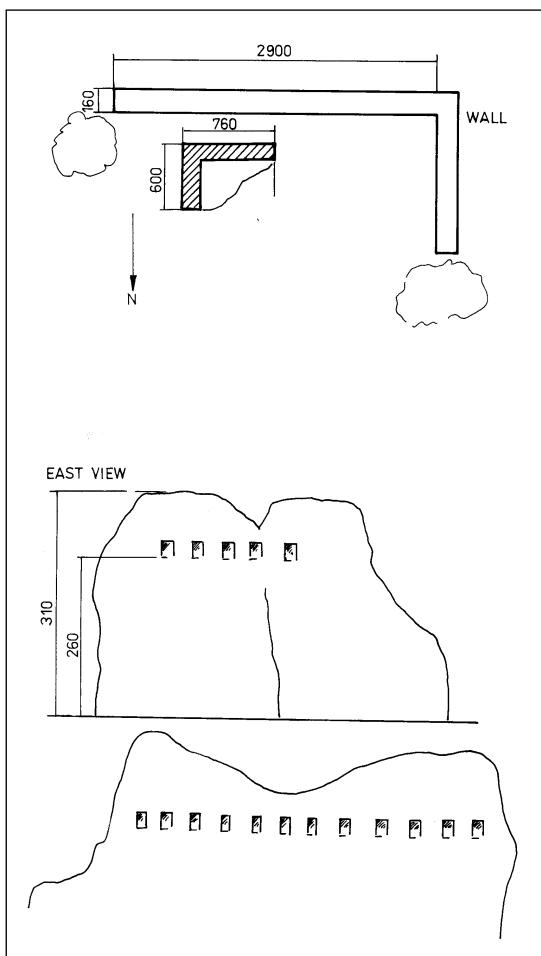


Fig. 12: Fortified house at SHAQURA



Fig. 13: Fort at SUWEIQI GHARB as seen from SUWEIQI SHARK

KALIDOB and the local people call SUWEIQI SHARK and SUWEIQI GHARB.

The two forts face each other on the two banks of the Nile (fig. 13), and certainly they are parts of a common design, although they differ in many aspects. The eastern one is roughly square, and each of its sides is pierced by rather unprotected doors and strengthened by bastions (fig. 16). Its high walls are constructed often on granite blocks, viewed as a part of the fortification system. In the middle of this area are the ruins of a building which must be interpreted as a church of a very late typology (fig. 14). The Christian character of the structure is also stressed by graffiti of crosses rather elegantly engraved near the door leading to the river, and which have certainly a protective value. Potsherds are scattered all over the ground, showing „Late Christian“ characteristics (fig. 17).

Similar is the case for the western fort, which consists of two enclosures, as it is the case for other Sudanese castles, which are prepared to shelter not only the people during the attacks from the desert, but also, and mostly, their cattle (fig. 15).

With these castles we could have finished our survey: but being the most conspicuous monuments of the region, they suggested a sort of supplement to our work. Therefore in 1989, on the occasion of a visit of PROF. WENIG to Karima, we took again into consideration our old project of collaboration.

We decided to consider another castle, not far from Karima, and just in front of Merowe, which is marked in the official maps as „Roman Castle“ following a designation of Titherington, and which is called by the inhabitants „EL MARKAZ“. Here are the remains of a huge complex, which inside still contains a small village.

Walls, bastions, doors, towers are rather well preserved and give an opportunity of looking at technical aspects of the building and its refections (fig. 18). The walls are of blocks of local sandstone, with some intrusions of spoils from inscribed temples, and are filled with loose material. The corners are protected through protruding round bastions which are now partially in ruin and show their powerful massive compact inside; the others are built in such a way that they lean to the wall without being part of it; a balcony runs at the interior of the fort wall, so to divide it into two levels (fig. 19). Some of these details are evident in another fortress further south, at a distance of about 25 km from the MARKAZ: that of MAQAL that we have ins-

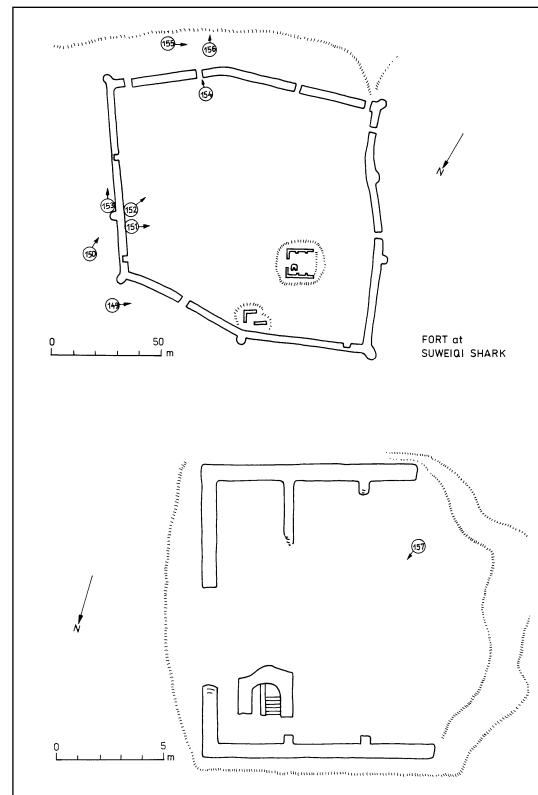


Fig. 14: FORT at SUWEIQI SHARK. Above: ground-plan. Below: remnants of a building inside the fort of Christian origin

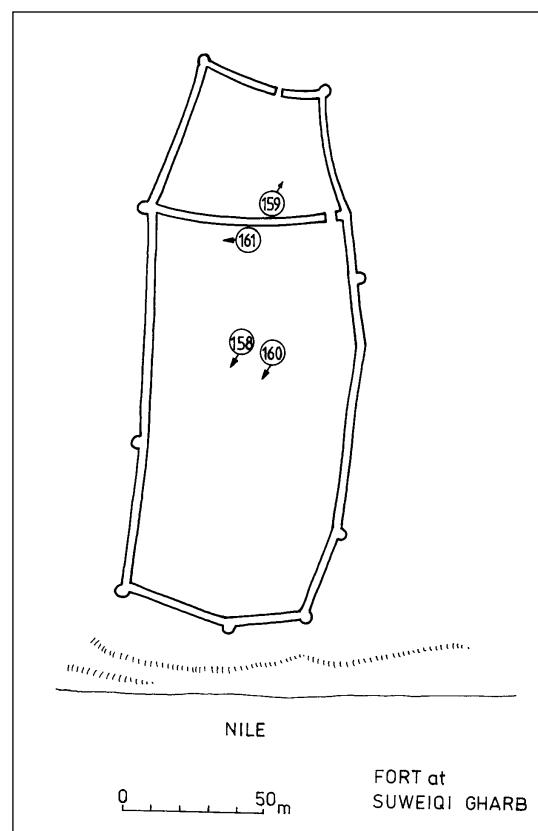


Fig. 15: Plan of the fortress at SUWEIQI GHARB



Fig. 16: Fort at SUWEIQI SHARK. Wall and bastion, outside view

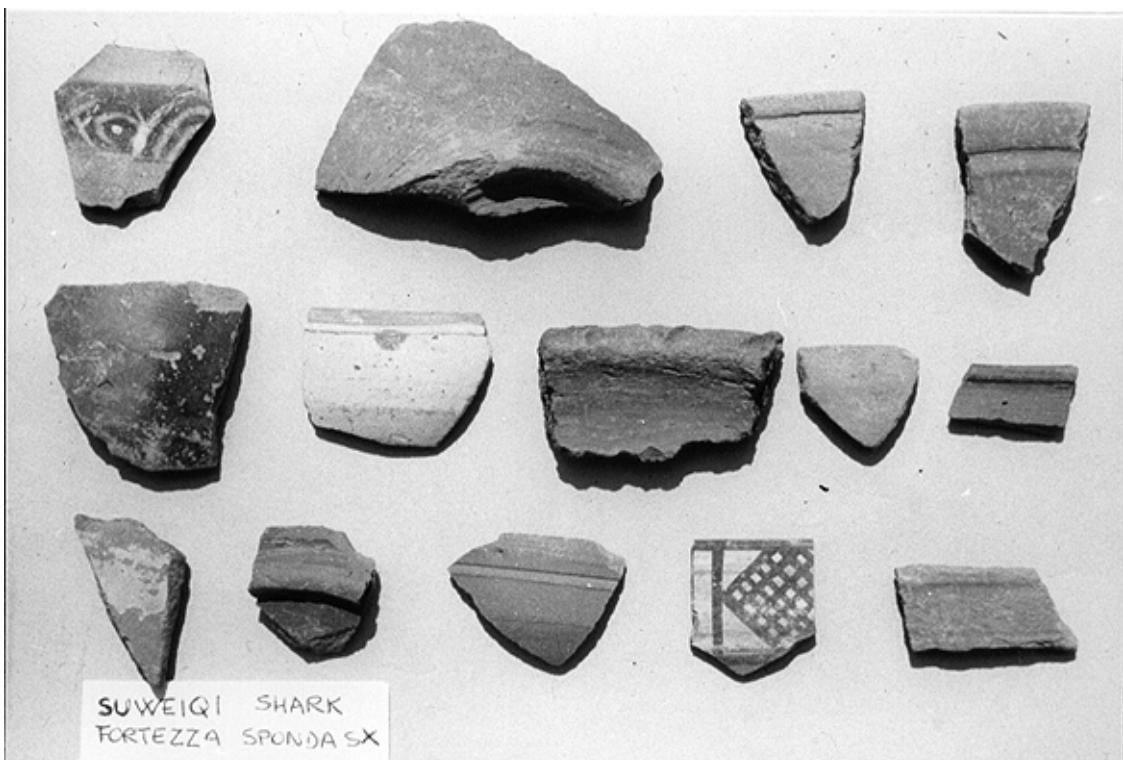


Fig. 17: Christian pottery from SUWEIQI SHARK

pected and found in too poor conditions for immediate observation.

To complete this list, a little north of EL MARKAZ is still standing in great parts a *kurfa*, the castle of the *kashef* of the area (fig. 20). Its best preserved element is a two flat tower, whose lower part is a compact of mud bricks and whose upper level is reached by means of an exterior ramp, while the roof is attained through an interior one.

The *kurfa* brings us very near to our times and with it our purpose of describing our experiences of the Fourth Cataract Survey could be finished. But I still have some more general considerations to make.

We must realize what is the meaning of the exploration of a region which just now (at the last „Meroitic Conference“ in London) is given a priority among the projects of the Sudanese Authorities. Another question is that of dams and basins. It could be advisable not to be reduced once more to that archaeology of emergency which is becoming the normal one all over the world, but which remains the less to be wished.

The obvious model could be the Nubian Salvage Campaign – and that could be true as far as

organisation (with its eventual improvements) is concerned. But for the other aspects no comparison is possible: in Nubia were big monuments, towns, inscriptions, necropoleis ranging from prehistory to Christian time, new civilizations had to be considered, sculptures, paintings, employed in a common work a host of institutions and scholars: it was the salvage of a “patrimoine de l’humanité”.

For the Fourth Cataract one cannot use the same rhetorical appeals, as it is certainly less important. But it has a special savour in its being a definite unit, whose remains are all concerned with life and death of simple people, putting definitely in the proscenium what is generally the background of history, proposing a type of archaeology which shades in ethnography, links past and present in a very peculiar approach.

It has not the ambition of widening the landscape of the history of mankind: but it is important because it aids to complete the tracing of the Sudanese history. If we consider that Sudan is probably the best key to all archaeological and historical research for the whole of Africa, I think that this is enough. •



Fig. 18: EL MARKAZ. The wall of the fortress



Fig. 19: EL MARKAZ. Inside view of the wall



Fig. 20: The kurfa of Merowe Takht