

## **Jebel Um Marrihi: A Late Post-Meroitic and Early Medieval Site (c. 325-650 AD) in Khartoum Province (Sudan).**

**Ahmed Abuelgasim El-Hassan**

***Abstract.** This paper will report on the field investigations carried out by the writer in central Sudan, at the site of Jebel Um Marrihi, about 38 km. north of Khartoum, on the west bank of the Nile. In the light of the major fieldworks and excavation projects currently taking place in northern and central Sudan, it seems timely to publish part of the substantive core of the survey undertaken by the writer at Jebel Um Marrihi site. The main archaeological features found were: (1) cemetery of burial mounds, previously known with several names as "Aloa ware" mounds, "Tanqasi culture", "sub-Meroitic" and "post-Meroitic". (2) settlement site of a hill fortress and a stone enclosure. The preliminary study of the grave types, hill fortress, pottery, other finds and radiocarbon dates shows that the site can be dated to the late post-Meroitic/early medieval period.*

### **Introduction**

The progress of fieldworks during the last two decades has made significant advances in the archaeology of northern and Central Sudan. The results of these projects have greatly enhanced our knowledge of the Meroitic, post-Meroitic (Hakem 1979, 1988; Geus 1984; Geus and Lenoble 1985; Lenoble 1987; Caneva 1988; Edwards 1991; Edwards et al 1998; El-Nur. O and Hassan. B 1994; Mallinson, M 1994; Mohammed & Hussein 1999), as well as the early medieval period as represented at Soba (Welsby 1987; Welsby and Daniels 1991). In the light of these major fieldworks and excavation projects currently taking place in Upper Nubia, it seems timely to publish the substantive core of the purposive survey project (prospection) undertaken by the writer at Jebel Um Marrihi area<sup>(1)</sup> (part of a concession allotted to the University of Khartoum) in September 1977 and January 78 (Fig. 1).

The goal of this survey project is related to the problem of the "end of Meroitic" civil-

isation which is the last phase in the history of Kush (4th cent. B. C. - 4th cent. A. D). Dominion of Meroitic Kush extended in the Nile Valley to the north as far as Maharraqa in Egyptian Nubia and to the south as far as Sennar and Jebel Moya. Due to its geographical proximity to Egypt, Egyptian influences were continually felt in its cultural spheres.

Lack of sufficient knowledge about most of the cultural aspects of Meroitic Kush led to regarding Meroites as pseudo-Egyptians. However, over the last hundred years many archaeological sites were excavated and displayed the local cultural traits of the Sudanese civilization (Kerman, Napatan and Meroitic Kush). Excavations answered many questions but some still remained unanswered. Of these unanswered questions are the southern boundaries of the Meroitic kingdom and "end of Meroe" and its consequences in central Sudan. No definite reasons could be given for the decline and fall of Meroe. Events associated with its collapse are very obscure. Various theories had been proposed. The long held hypothesis assumes

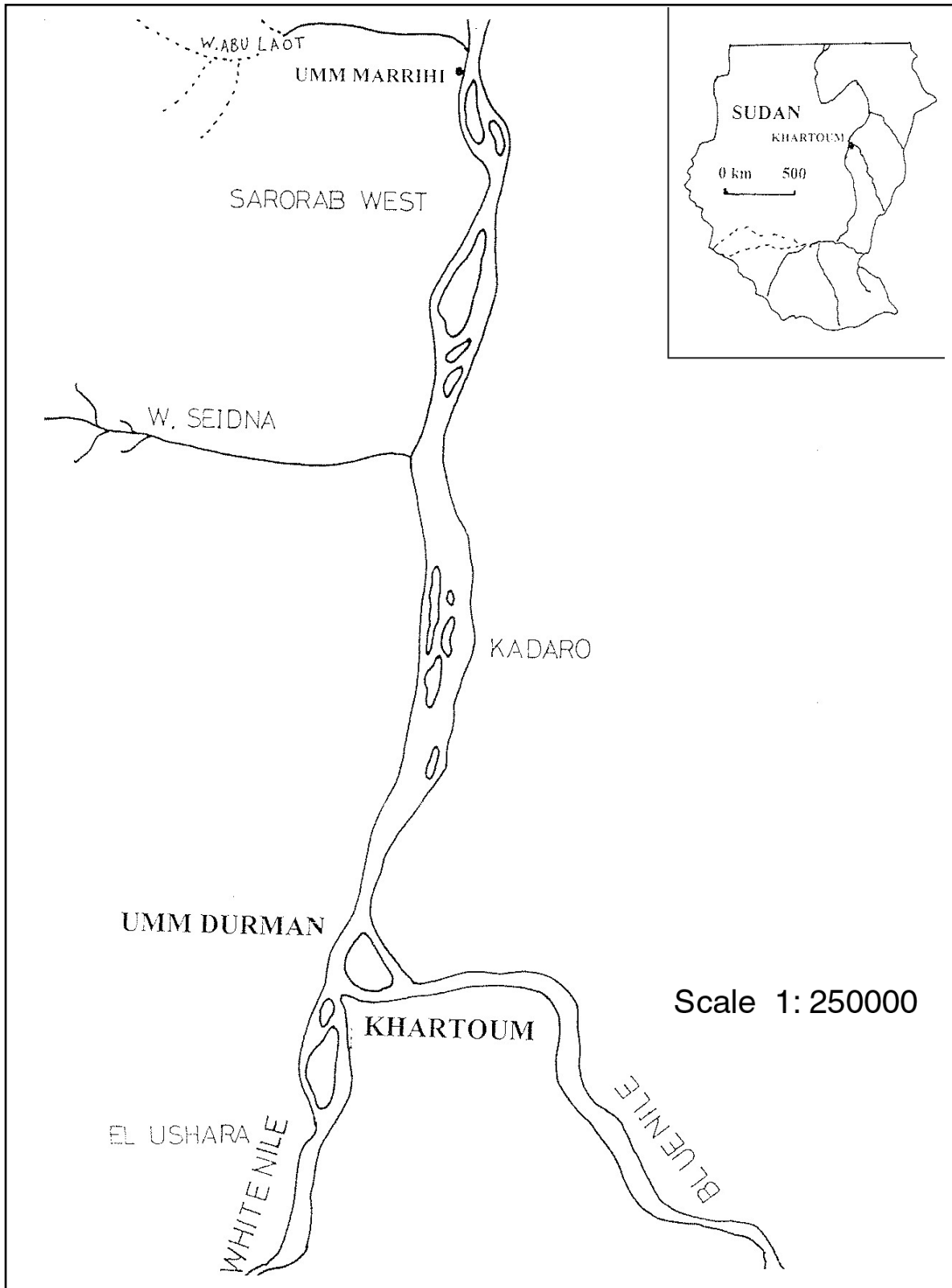


Fig. 1: General map showing location of J. Um Marrihi and some other places mentioned in the text.

that "Aloa ware" pottery and tumulus burials could be identified with an alien cultural tradition, representing the appearance of an intrusive "Noba" population in central Sudan. A series of tumulus graves along the Nile from Sennar to Tabo (Jacquet-Gordon & Bonnet 1972: 77- 83) were attributed to this period.

The main goal of the survey project is to answer the question dealing with the cultural situation that prevailed in central Sudan at the end of Meroitic Kingdom. At the same time, one hopes to spread the present knowledge of the rich archaeological heritage in central Sudan in order to make its preservation feasible in the very near future. In the Khartoum province all archaeological remains are severely threatened because of Khartoum urban expansion and the recent discovery of oil. If no positive action is taken and if inhabitants do not protect ancient sites, the Sudan will lose a large part of its ancient cultural history. Because of eminent destructive activities, cultural resource management projects have to be implemented.

Jebel Um Marrihi was chosen as survey area for the following reasons:

- 1- It contains tumulus graves associated with settlement sites.
- 2- It is part of a concession allotted by the Directory of Antiquities and Museums to the University of Khartoum.

### The Archaeological Survey:

Jebel Um Marrihi lies some 38 km downstream of Khartoum, on the west bank of the Nile between the village of El Sheikh el Tayib and the Khor el Disheinab<sup>(2)</sup>. The village below the hill is named after El Sheikh Ah-

med el Tayib el Bashir (CE 1740-1824), whose shrine burial is located there, and was an important religious centre since the eighteenth century, associated particularly with the Sammania sufi sect (Nor el Daim 1973: 250).

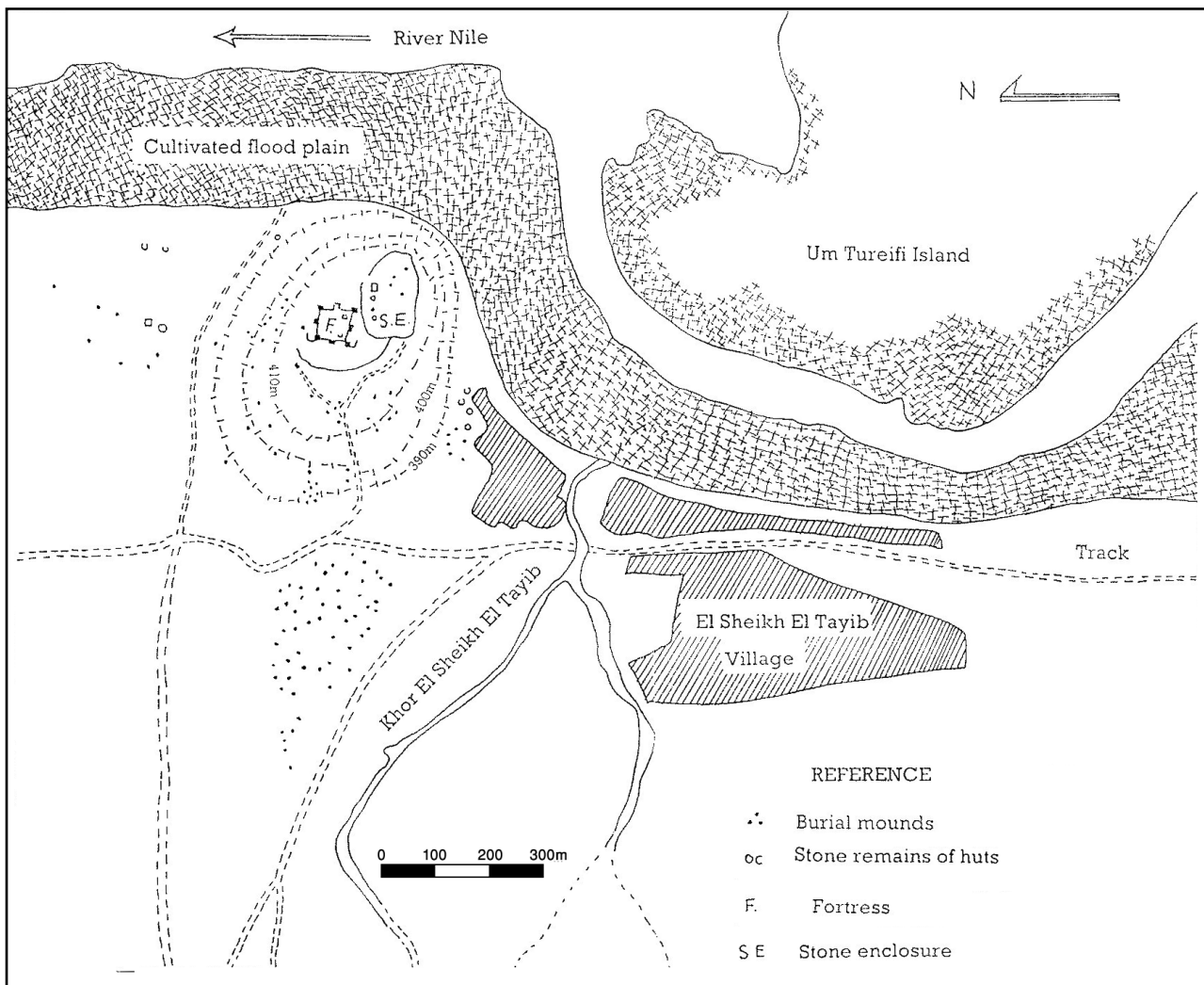
The jebel is a prominent flat-topped sandstone feature some 410m above sea level, overlooking the Nile opposite the north end of Um Tureifi Island. This area fell within the University of Khartoum concession area, where a number of sites were investigated during the 1970s, mainly between 1973 and 1978. Most of this work was concentrated in the southern half of the area, between Khor Wadi Seidna and Bauda village: the investigating sites included Bauda, Urdi, Kawahla, Islang, Nofalab and Harazab. Jebel Um Marrihi, lying further north, was only briefly visited during 1973 until a preliminary survey was undertaken during 1976, followed by more intensive survey and test-excavations during 1977-1978<sup>(3)</sup>.

Methods of inspection employed in the survey were as follows:

- 1- Visual inspection of aerial photographs with ground-checks.
- 2- Visual inspection in surface survey.
- 3- Test-excavations. The main archaeological features found (Fig. 2) were a cemetery and a settlement site with a hill fortress.

### 1. The cemetery

Immediately west of Jebel Um Marrihi, an extensive cemetery of 106 burial mounds was recorded, extending along the high gravel ridge overlooking the flood plain. The mounds were spread over an area extending



**Fig. 2: Map of sites at J. Um Marrihi.**

some 350 m. north-south and 515 m. east-west, with the greatest density of graves on its east side (Fig. 3).

A number of factors were noted as contributing to the ongoing erosion of the site. Natural factors include water erosion during the rainy season with several small gullies cutting through the site running down to Khor El Sheikh el Tayyib further south. Cars' tracks have also been damaging parts of the sites, cutting across several grave mounds. The quarrying of gravels and sand for building work has also been destructive, and de-

liberate robbing of graves, especially in the north eastern part of the cemetery, was also in evidence, although its date remains unknown.

The burial mounds varied considerably in size, most being between 5 and 15 m. in diameter, with two examples (Tumulus burial nos. 104, and 105) being larger than 15 m. Their heights ranged between 0.5 and 2 m. Such dimensions of course do not reflect their original size, the superstructures having undergone considerable erosion since they were first constructed. Three main types of

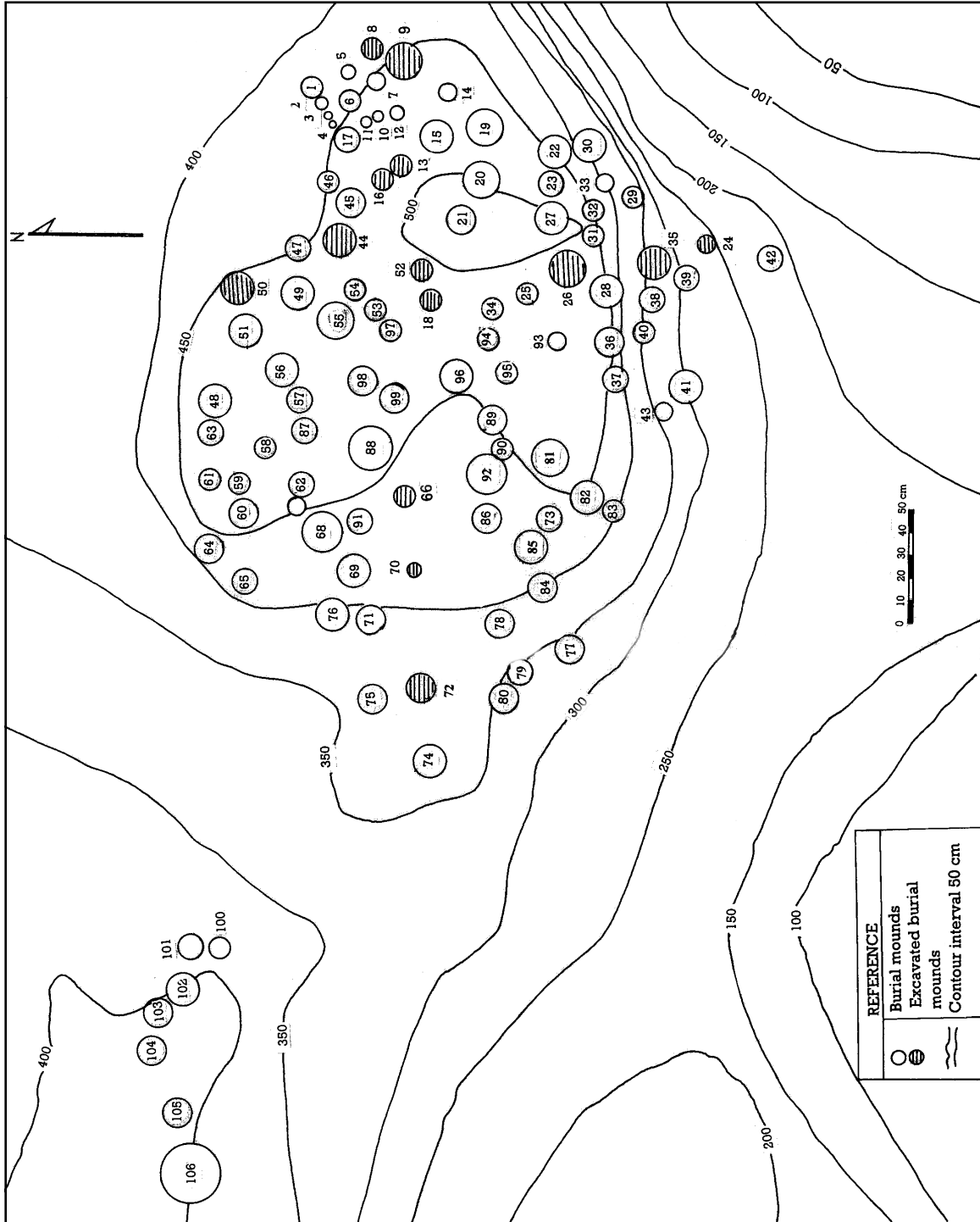


Fig. 3: Plan of the main cemetery of J. Um Marrihi site.

superstructures were identified:

- 1- Cairn structures of loose sandstone blocks.
- 2- Tumuli surrounded with low enclosure walls.
- 3- Simple tumuli, constructed of sand, gravels and rubble, possibly with stone edging.

In addition to the cemetery, a further 49 scattered burial mounds were recorded on the surface of the hill and at the foot of the hill to north and south. The superstructures were largely made of stone rubble, similar to the cairns found in the north eastern part of the cemetery. Generally, their diameter ranged between 5 and 10 m.

### Surface finds

On the surface among the burial mounds numerous, mainly handmade, sherds were noted. These included burnished/polished red slipped wares, sherds decorated with mat impressions, finger impressions, and some incised designs, some infilled with red or white pigment. These appeared similar to sherd material recorded at Bauda, likely to be of late or post-Meroitic date (Hakim 1979: 153). Small quantities of lithics, and sherds similar to Mesolithic material from Khartoum Hospital (Arkell 1949) were also noted, especially on the eastern part of the site. This was confirmed later and it proved to be one of the earliest wavy line bearing sites in the central Sudan (Elamin and Mohammed Ali 2004).

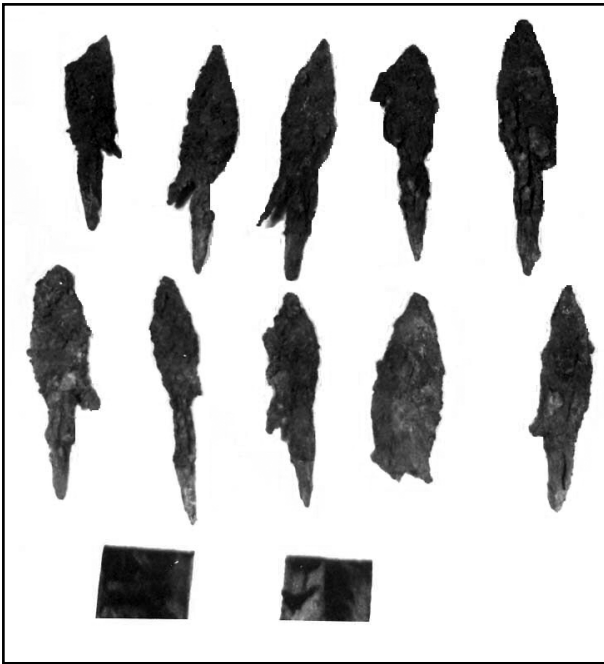
### The excavations:

Small-scale test excavations were carried-out within the cemetery during 1977 and 1978. Of the total of 155 graves registered

during the survey, 18 were selected for investigation. This work revealed little variation in burial types or grave furnishings, but some variability in the form of both the superstructures and grave substructures. Each of the excavated graves covered a central burial. Most of the burials mounds had a stone core covered by a large tumulus. The stone cores were roughly circular 1.5-3 m in diameter and 0.5-1 m high, and were built of sandstone boulders, sealing the grave shaft. In addition, the tumuli also covered sub circular stone walls, which originally may have enclosed the mounds. These were relatively well-constructed with the stones set in mud in construction trenches. In some cases the tumulus was demarcated by a ring of single stones or a stone layer, but more often a horseshoe shaped ring of calcareous soil surrounded the grave, with an entrance to the east. This eastern entrance may have allowed access to the shaft during funerary rites.

The majority of the graves were sub-circular or oval in shape, with the principal orientation along a north-south axis. Cutting alluvial deposits, some graves were cut into the Nubian sandstone. The size of the grave shafts varied considerably, ranging from 1-1.5 m. in diameter in adult graves to no more than 0.8 m. in diameter in children's graves. The child burials have generally shallow shafts less than 0.5 m. deep while the adult had shafts ranging from 0.2-1.5 m. deep. Adult graves generally had a step or a raised ledge on the eastern part of the shaft leading to a widened oval or sub-circular chamber on the west side. In few cases sloping entrance shafts or ramps were found leading to the burial chamber (For example type C, tumulus burial no. 24).

Although many of these burials were poorly preserved, they showed considerable



**Fig. 4: Barbed iron arrowheads found in burials.**

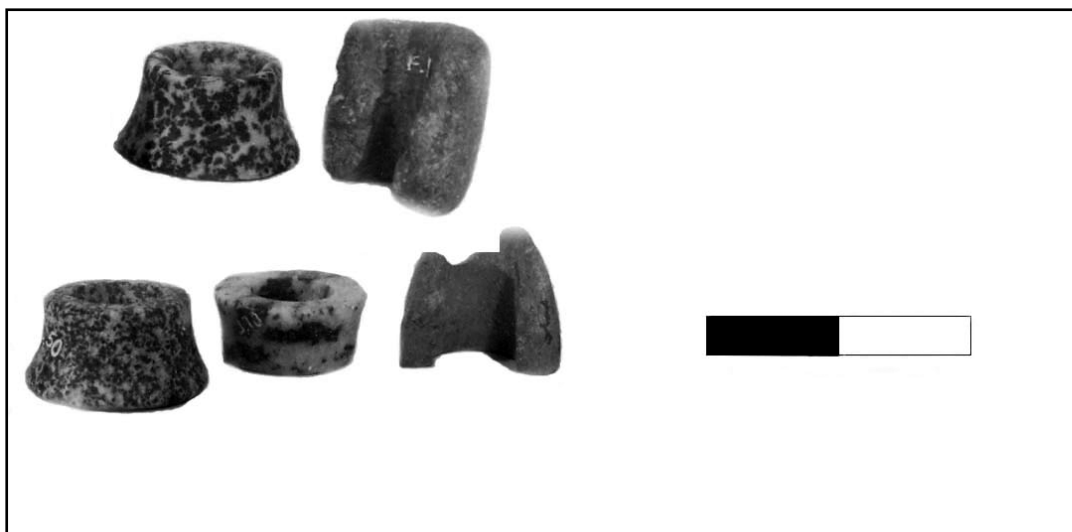
uniformity in burial practices. The bodies were laid-out in various stages of contraction on their right side, head to the south, facing east. No multiple burials were found. Globular jars, bowls and cups were sometimes placed to the east of the body, while other objects were placed around the body. All

the pottery found inside the graves was hand-made. Other objects included iron arrow-heads (Fig. 4), stone archer's looses (Fig. 5), iron and copper-alloy jewellery, copper alloy bells (Fig. 6) faience, stone and ostrich egg-shell beads. Some traces of textiles, some apparently of green colour were also noted.

The chambers of the burials appear to have been sealed with a wooden cover; traces of these wooden roofs were found in almost all the excavated mounds, either set on the grave shaft or found decayed and collapsed inside the grave pits. It may also be noted that sherds representing complete pots, similar to vessels found in the grave chambers, were found placed in the tumulus superstructures, and this probably relates to funerary rites. While first thought to have been accidentally incorporated in the mounds, the frequency of such finds indicates that they were deliberately deposited in the tumuli.

### The Burials

Based on superstructures and substructure



**Fig. 5: Complete stone archer looses from the graves and broken ones from the settlement.**



**Fig 6: Bronze bells and rings from burials.**

shapes as variables, four main types of burials were recognised:

Type A graves, the most common, had tumuli covering a stone core, sealing an oval / subcircular shaft (Fig. 7). A step on the east side leads down to the grave entrance, dropping down to the chamber. Some graves also had a stone wall or a ring of stones encircling the grave.

Type B graves lacked the stone cores or enclosure walls under the mound.

Type C graves had tumuli over a low circular stone core. Grave shafts sloping from the east stepping down into north-south oriented chambers at west end. C-shaped mound around shafts with eastern entrance.

In type D the tumulus is made of stones, gravels, quartz pebbles, and alluvial soil and sand covering overlaid on an oval shallow shaft of a north south orientation.

**Type A:**

This type is made of low tumuli with circular stone superstructures, each with a ring of stone wall. Sometimes, a horse shoe cal-

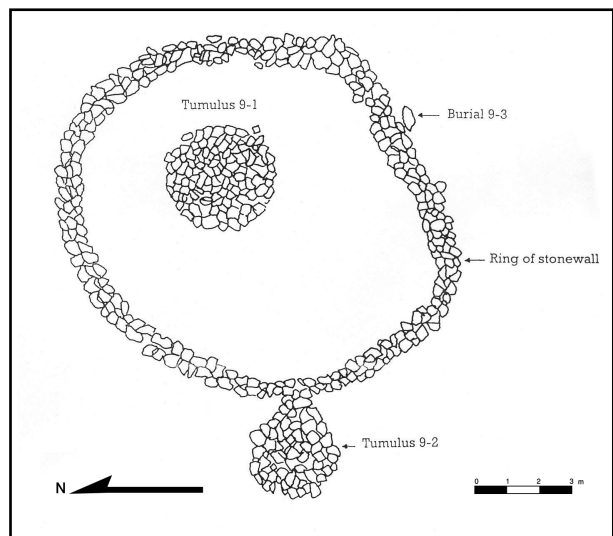
careous structure with an eastern entrance was found underneath the stone superstructure. The stone superstructure usually covers an oval or circular opening with the horizontal base oriented north-south. This type of graves includes the following:

**Tumulus no. 8**

Superstructure: low tumulus of gravels and stone covering stone core, 2.5 m. in diameter, 0.55 m. high sealing chamber. Surrounding wall 0.5 m. thick and 0.35 m. high, partially destroyed by road. Sherds in tumulus fill and crude bowl were found intact over grave pit.

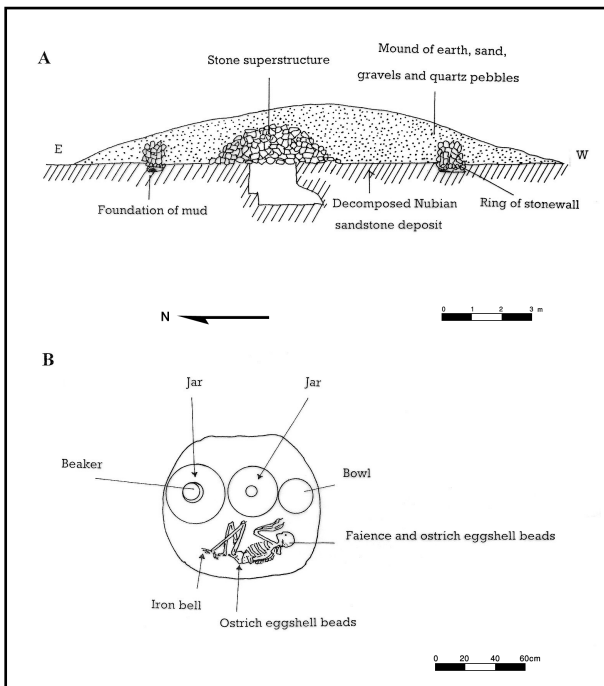
Substructure: shallow circular pit, 1.5 m. diameter and 1.1 m. deep. Ledge 0.6 x 0.24 m. on eastern side.

Burial: earlier burial (tumulus burial no. 8-1), contracted on right side, head to the south facing east disturbed by secondary burial. 52 ostrich eggshell beads in necklace and 13 green faience beads in pelvic area. Secondary burial (tumulus burial no. 8-2) buried at 0.7 m. below surface with stone



**Fig. 7:Top plan of tumulus burial no. 9.**





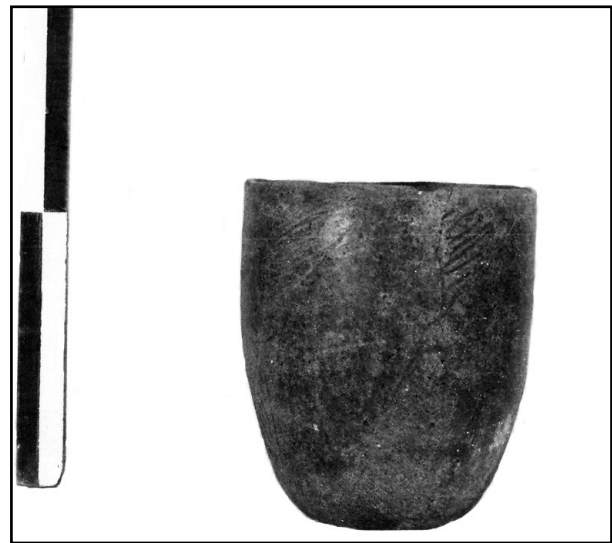
**Fig. 8: (A) Cross-section of tumulus burial no. 9 (type A). (B) Top plan of the burial shaft.**

layer between it and lower burial. Body contracted on right side, head to the south facing east, knees tightly bent. Possibly male. 46 ostrich eggshell beads on left wrist and a further 1385 in neck area.

### Tumulus no. 9-1

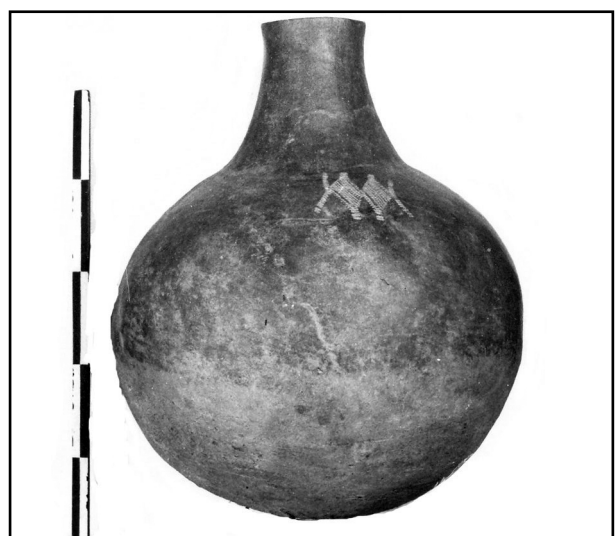
Superstructure: tumulus of gravels and stone covering stone core 1.05 m. high and 3.3 m. in diameter sealing burial pit. Stone wall surrounding burial 11 m. in diameter, 0.6 m. high and c.0.65 m. thick (Figs. 7, 8). Similar to enclosure wall in tumulus burial no. 8, with stones mortared with gravels and sand, set on a mud layer. Sherds in superstructure included a reconstructable black-burnished dish.

Substructure: circular pit 1.4 m. deep and 1.5 m. in diameter with step 0.25 m. wide on east side. Chamber widens to 0.93 m. Traces of wooden roofing.



**Fig. 9: Red slipped and polished beaker with incised decoration. Tumulus burial no. 9.**

Burial: tightly contracted male, head to the south facing east. Two globular jars on east side of chamber with a cup (Fig. 9) inverted over mouth of larger jar (Fig. 10), and bowl (Fig. 11) on south side of jars. Ostrich eggshell beads and 3 faience beads at neck, 44 eggshell beads in pelvic area. Iron object (bell?) near feet. Traces of textile.



**Fig. 10: Red polished globular jar with impressed decoration. Tumulus burial no. 9.**



**Fig. 11: Black polished bowl with a rim band decorated on interior with impressed designs. Tumulus burial no. 9.**

#### **Tumulus no. 9-2**

A child burial located just outside the stone-enclosing wall on the west side of the mound (Fig. 7).

Superstructure: low stone mound 10-20 cm. high.

#### **Substructure: shallow pit.**

Burial: child burial in tightly contracted position, laid on its right side, head to south, facing east. Necklace of very small eggshell beads.

#### **Tumulus no. 9-3**

A further burial outside enclosure wall on south side (Fig. 7).

#### **Superstructure: none**

Substructure: small oval pit 70 x 90 cm., 65 cm. deep, oriented northeast-southwest.

Burial: burial contracted on right side,

head to southwest, facing southeast. Necklace of 23 small eggshell beads. Skeleton poorly preserved.

#### **Tumulus no. 16**

Superstructure: low mound of gravels and stones overlying a stone core sealing grave shaft. A ring of stones surrounded pit. Sherds in tumulus.

Substructure: shallow circular pit 1.2 m. in diameter and 0.96 m. deep. A ledge 0.4 m. wide on the eastern side of the grave.

Burial: heavily disturbed by robbing with sherds and bones pulled close to the surface. 15 ostrich eggshell beads in fill. Body probably laid on right side, head to south facing east, with knees tightly bent. 424 eggshell beads and 5 green faience beads in pelvic area.

#### **Tumulus no. 26**



**Fig. 12: Black polished bowl with impressed dots on its rim stance.**

Superstructure: earth and gravel mound over stone core over burial shaft. Stone enclosure wall around mound, partly robbed during insertion of Islamic burial. Tumulus material included 146 sherds.

Substructure: Oval chamber 110 x 115 cm., 157 cm. deep. Step 50 cm. wide on east side. Traces of wooden chamber blocking, collapsed.

Burial: burial crushed by fill. Possibly male, laid on right side, tightly contracted, head south facing east. Two large red-slipped jars and black polished bowl (Fig. 12) on east side of burial. 66 iron arrowheads near knees and head and 2 iron circlets with three bronze bells attached by short iron chains on head. Two other bronze bells and rings found near feet, 2 bells at neck. Two iron finger rings close to left hand and 3 bronze rings by right hand. Stone archer's loose on right thumb. 99 quartz, 72 carnelian, 32 faience beads with agate pendant at neck.

#### **Tumulus no. 35**

Superstructure: earth and gravel mound with stone core and stone wall enclosing it.

Southern part of mound disturbed by Islamic burial. 7 sherds found within tumulus material.

Substructure: Oval chamber 117 x 90 cm., 80 cm. deep. Ledge 44 cm. wide on east side. Traces of wood chamber blocking.

Burial: possibly female. Body on right side, contracted, head to the south facing east. Necklace of 140 eggshell beads. Small red slipped jar (Fig. 13) on step to east of body. Burial and pot poorly preserved.

#### **Tumulus no. 44**

Superstructure: mound of earth and gravel over stone core. No enclosing wall. Disturbance of stone core by robbing, with bone fragments, eggshell and faience beads in robbing fill. 5 sherds in tumulus material.

Substructure: Oval chamber 130 x 120 cm., 115 cm. deep, cut into dark clay. Sloping ledge 40 cm. wide on east side. Traces of wood chamber blocking.

Burial: burial disturbed by robbing. Lower limbs in situ indicating contracted burial laid on right side, facing east. Possibly male.

Six corroded iron arrowheads, 183 eggshell beads, 3 cylindrical green faience beads and a stone archer's loose infill, with fragments of wooden tomb blocking. (Radiocarbon sample taken but proved abortive).

**Tumulus no. 52**

Superstructure: earth and gravel mound with stone core and stone enclosing wall (Fig. 14). Stone core overlies C-shaped ring of white calcareous soil around shaft with opening on east side. 16 sherds in tumulus.

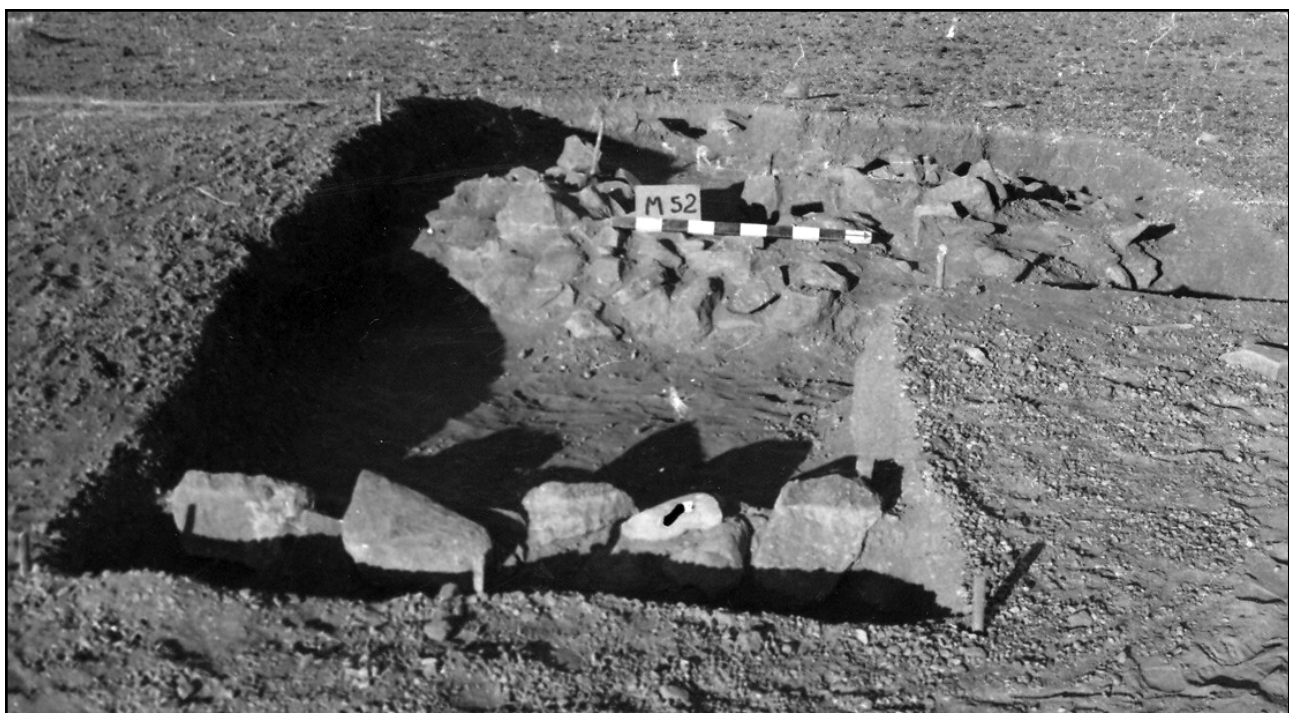
Substructure: Oval chamber, 120 x 100 cm., 115 cm. deep, with 40 cm. wide ledge on east side. Many fragments of wood, from disturbed chamber blocking recovered.

Burial: burial heavily disturbed by robbing with bone fragments, sherds of a large jar, faience and eggshell beads in robbing fill. Some of lower limbs in situ indicating burial laid on right side in contracted posi-



**Fig. 13: Pl. 3 Red polished globular jar. Tumulus burial no. 35.**

tion, head south facing east. 42 eggshell and 4 cylindrical green faience beads in neck area and 64 eggshell beads around pelvis.



**Fig. 14: Tumulus burial no. 52 during excavation.**

No pottery found within grave.

## Type B

This type consists of mound graves made mainly of gravels and earth without any stone enclosure or stone superstructure. Sometimes they have horse-shoe structures with eastern entrances made of soil obtained from inside the grave pits. The grave usually has a circular or oval opening oriented north-south. At the bottom it widens out in particular to the west with a slight ledge at the base on the east side. The type includes the following graves:

### Tumulus no. 18

**Superstructure:** mound of sand and gravel. C-shaped mound of white calcareous soil around shaft entrance, opening to the east. No sherds in tumulus fill.

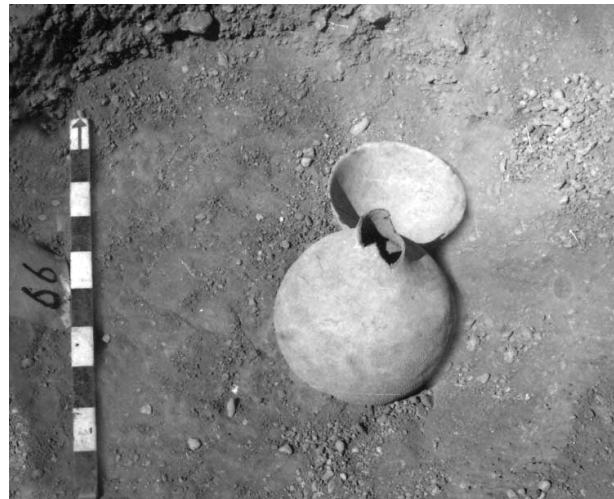
**Substructure:** circular shaft 80 cm. diameter and 115 cm. deep with 40 cm. wide step on east side with parts of collapsed wooden chamber blocking preserved.

**Burial:** burial laid on right side, contracted, head south facing east. Skeleton crushed by collapse of chamber blocking. Broken red-brown pot on east side of burial. Necklace of 98 eggshell and 40 green cylindrical faience beads. Two corroded iron earrings near skull.

### Tumulus no. 50

**Superstructure:** mound of sand and gravel. C-shaped mound of red-brown soil around shaft entrance, opening to the east. Tumulus disturbed by two intrusive Islamic burials. 6 sherds from tumulus material.

**Substructure:** shaft cut by intrusive burials, originally oval 112 x 80 cm., 76 cm.



**Fig. 15: Tumulus burial no. 66.**

deep. Dug into black alluvial clay with 30 cm. wide ledge on east side.

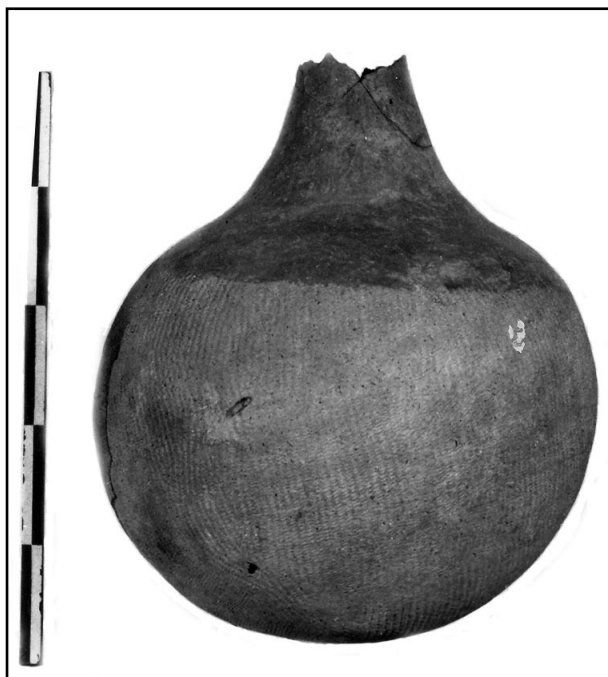
**Burial:** burial disturbed by later burials. Lower part of body partly preserved, indicated body was laid on right side, contracted, head south facing east. Black-polished sherd by skull. 47 eggshell beads at neck, 6 corroded iron arrowheads and a diorite archer's loose by knees.

### Tumulus no. 66 (Fig. 15)

**Superstructure:** very low mound 30cm. high of sand and gravel. No sherds in mound.

**Substructure:** oval shaft 160 x 136 cm., only 40 cm. deep. Ledge 75 cm. wide on east side. Fragments of wood, probably from chamber blocking.

**Burial:** contracted burial on right side, head south facing east. Skeleton poorly preserved. Large globular jar (Fig. 16) with mat impressed decoration and black bowl on ledge. 55 eggshell, 2 glass and 7 cylindrical faience beads at neck. 136 eggshell beads around pelvis.



**Fig. 16: Mat impressed globular jar. Tumulus burial no. 66.**

#### **Tumulus no. 70**

Superstructure: mound of sand and gravel. C-shaped mound of yellow-brown gravels around shaft entrance, opening to the east. No sherds in mound.

Substructure: oval shaft 111 x 100 cm., widening to west at base, 110 deep with 40 cm. wide ledge on east side.

Burial: possibly male burial, buried on right side, contracted, head south facing east. Jar (Fig. 17) and bowl (Fig. 18) on northeast side of chamber. 9 green cylindrical faience beads around left wrist. 63 eggshell beads around neck, 6 corroded iron arrowheads by knees. Iron ring at feet and diorite archer's loose on thumb of right hand.

#### **Type C**

This type consists of low mounds of gravels and stones and decayed stone superstructures of circular shape. The shape of the



**Fig. 17: Black polished globular jar with schematic designs of huts. Tumulus burial no. 70.**

opening of the grave is sub-rectangular with a north-south axis. It usually has an elongated sloping entrance (ramp) in the east. A horse-shoe structure is built around opening of the grave. Its entrance coincides with the sloping entrance of the grave which leads down to a drop cave chamber. This type of graves includes the following:

#### **Tumulus no. 24**

Superstructure: low mound of sand gravels and decayed sandstone, with a stone core 20 - 25 cm. high. 3 sherds found in tumulus material.

Substructure: sloping trapezoid grave shaft c.150 cm. long leading to sub rectangular entrance to chamber, 150 x 60 cm., 100 cm. deep. Traces of a wooden chamber blocking.

Burial: burial on right side, contracted, head south facing east. Skeleton poorly preserved. 64 eggshell beads around neck and 72 eggshell beads around pelvis. Large black sherd with worn edges in front of hands. Corroded iron fragments near knees.



**Fig. 18: Black polished bowl with impressed designs filled with red pigment. Tumulus burial no. 70.**

### **Tumulus no. 72**

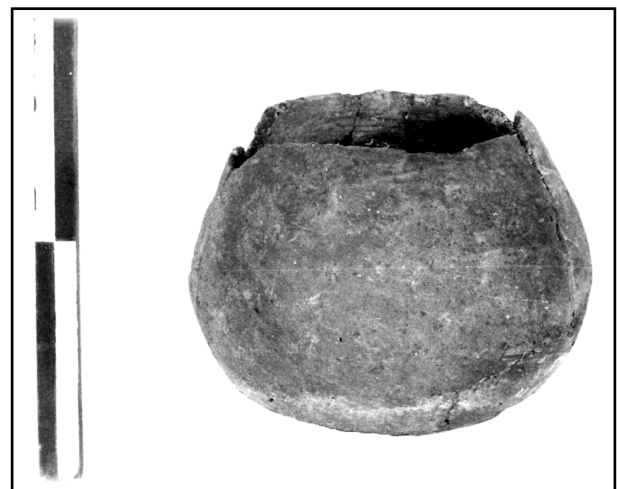
Superstructure: low mound of gravel and some sandstone rubble over low rubble core. C-shaped mound around shaft opening to east. Two sherds in mound material.

Substructure: trapezoid sloping shaft with oval chamber at west end 110 x 80 cm. Fragments of wood, probably from chamber blocking, in shaft.

Burial: burial apparently disturbed with skull near feet bones. Body originally laid on right side, contracted with head to the south, facing east. Grey black bowl (Fig. 19) near knees and necklace of 58 eggshell, 12 green faience and 2 glass beads. 37 eggshell beads around pelvis.

### **Type D**

This type consists of simple graves of small mounds of rubbles and gravels, covering an oval opening of a shallow simple



**Fig. 19: Grey black bowl. Tumulus burial no. 72.**

shaft which is oriented north-south. Burials of this type include the following:

#### **Tumulus no. 22**

**Superstructure:** small mound of rubble over gravels. A broken pot, in 90 pieces was recovered from the mound.

**Substructure:** simple oval shaft 170 x 135 cm., 35-40 cm. deep, oriented north-south. Traces of wood, charcoal and ash at top of grave shaft and in grave fill.

**Burial:** burial contracted on right side, head south, facing east. Skeleton poorly preserved. 44 eggshell beads around pelvis and 23 eggshell beads by neck. Green glazed

amulet of goddess Hathor (Fig. 20) and faience scarab near heels.

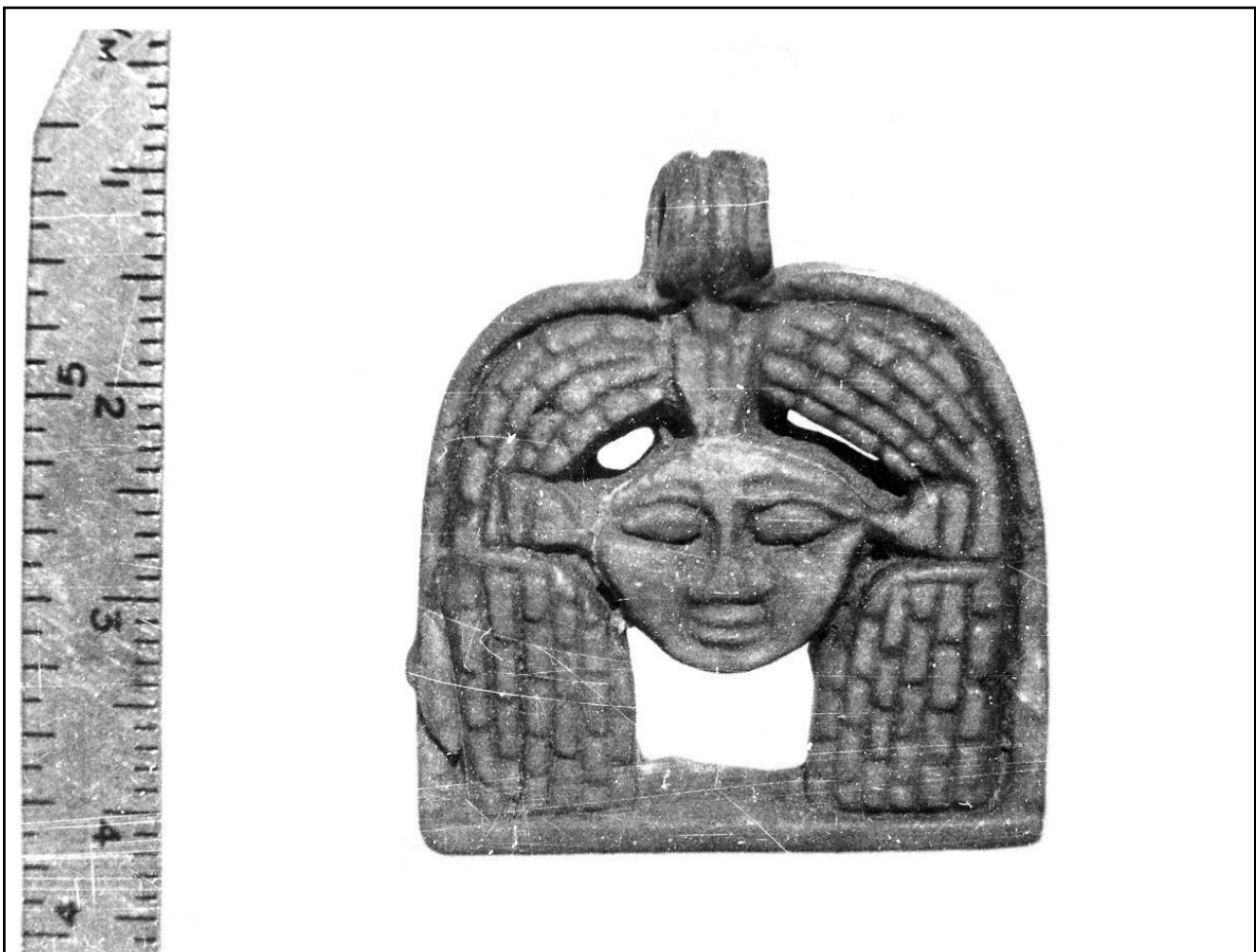
#### **Tumulus no. 29**

**Superstructure:** small mound of rubble and gravel. Some sherds in mound material.

**Substructure:** shallow oval shaft 100 x 80 cm., 45 cm. deep in centre of mound.

**Burial:** burial oriented north-south on right side, contracted, with head to south facing east. 29 eggshell and 31 green faience cylindrical beads at neck.

#### **Robbed graves**



**Fig. 20: Green glazed Hathor amulet, Tumulus burial no. 22.**



Tumuli 1, 11, and 13 were all found to have been very heavily robbed and no useful information survived concerning the burials. It seems likely that most of the graves with low cairns in the northeast part of the site had been robbed. Tumulus no. 44 and tumulus no. 52 were also robbed, with robbing pits cut through the centre of the mounds.

### Pottery and date of the cemetery

Pottery represents the most important and largest group of artefacts found in the cemetery. Its preliminary study was carried out with two limitations: 1. limitations imposed by the goals of the research. 2. limitations imposed by the small size of the sample. The total collection of the pottery found in the cemetery consists of 16 complete pots and 411 potsherds. 13 of the complete pots are found in the graves whereas 3 in superstructures. Thus only few complete pots have been found and this was due to the small sample of graves dug. The majority of the sherds are reported from the superstructures of the tumuli.

15 of the complete vessels found in the graves are handmade whereas only one dish (from superstructure of tumulus burial no. 9) is wheel made. According to forms, complete vessels from the cemetery can be classified into the following:

1. Six globular jars with narrow necks (an example is shown in Fig. 10).
2. One large globular jar with a short neck (Fig. 17).
3. One medium globular jar with a sloping short neck (Fig. 13).
4. Seven bowls with traces of long use and wear (as in Figs. 11, 18, 19).

5. A small deep beaker (Fig. 9).

6. A small flat dish.

Nearly all the jars and bowls have rounded bases whereas the beaker and the black wheel-made dish have flat bases.

Most of the globular jars are red slipped particularly on the upper parts of their bodies. Their lower parts were often left unslipped. On these red slipped and polished surfaces sometimes different complex designs of impressed or incised decorations were made with white or red pigment filling (Fig. 10, 16, 17). The bowls seem to have the same style of decoration. For example, the bowl from grave no. 70 (Fig. 18) is decorated with three bands of diamond shaped motifs on the upper parts on the exterior surface. The diamond shapes were outlined and hatched with dotted lines. Sometimes bowls are decorated on their stances with impressed dots, short lines or zizag like design made of impressed dots.

The graves, pottery and other finds show that the cemetery may be dated to the late post-Meroitic / early medieval period (perhaps as late as the transition to early Medieval Christian period). The suggested post-Meroitic / early medieval use of the cemetery is of relatively short period. No temporal periods could be distinguished within the cemetery because it is small in size, there are few pottery types, and the graves dug are limited.

The graves of the cemetery appear to be of close similarity in their types and burial traditions to those of Kabbashi on the east bank (Caneva, I, 1994: 81-95), Khartoum (Arkell, 1949: 119-130), Shaheinab (Ibid, 1953: 92-96 ), Bauda (Al Hakim 1979: 151-155), Ushara (Marshall and Abdel Rahman

A, 1953: 40-46), and Meroe (Garstang, 1910: 69-70; 1911: 29-33).

Pottery with decorative patterns and forms similar to those reported at the cemetery of Jebel Um Marrihi are known from Kabbashi, Khartoum, Shaheinab, Bauda, Ushara and Blue Nile sites Sennar, Wad El hadad (Edwards, 1991: 41-64). Most interesting is the very close similarity of a jar to one from Khartoum. The handmade globular jar of burial no. 70 (of Um Marrihi) is very similar in decoration and form to that reported by Arkell (Pl. 106, grave M. 15) at Khartoum. Both were of black polished slip on the exterior surfaces and decorated with impressed schematic designs of huts with traces of pigment filling. Nothing similar is known from other burials. It is interesting that some vessel forms of the cemetery under study are better known types associated with some unknown and unusual forms for which parallels are only known from Sarorab and Bauda sites. It is noticeable that the known "beer-jars" of early post-Meroitic as those common at Kadada were not, so far, found at Um Marrihi cemetery.

The suggestion of dating the cemetery and its pottery to as late as early medieval Christian period is indicated furthermore by the discovery of typical post-Meroitic pottery types at Soba. Most medieval pottery of Soba site appears to be a development of earlier post-Meroitic types (Edwards, personal communication). The dating of the cemetery is further supported by a single radiocarbon date obtained from burial no. 18. The result of the dating of the sample by conventional radiocarbon is: Years BP 1200 \* 70 (A. D 750). With recent calibration this suggests calibrated date of 690 A. D. This may be correct when we take this single date to

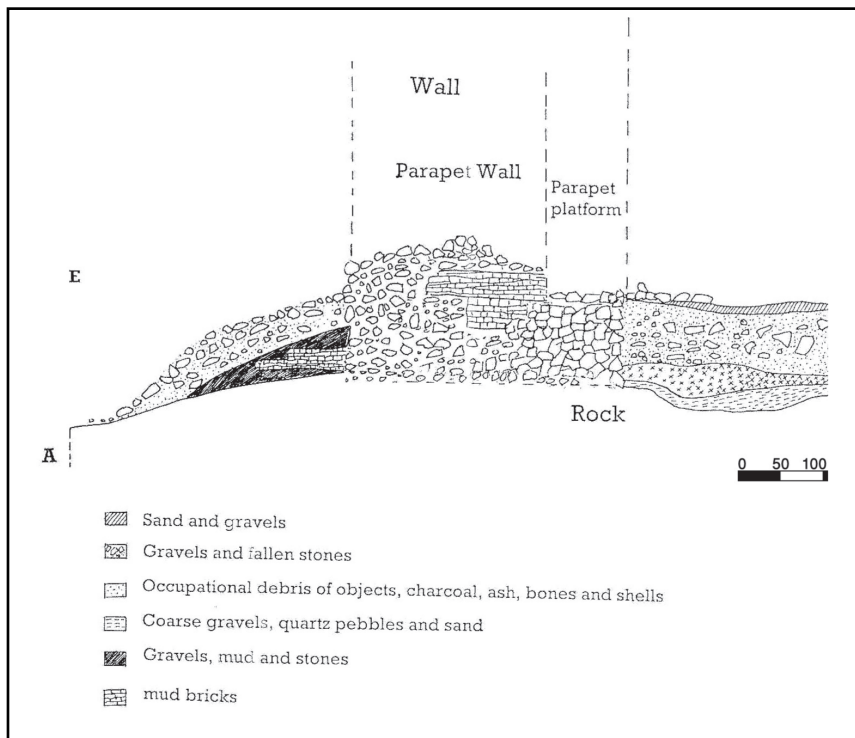
match with that of Gabati where there are tumulus burials with dates of 675 A. D or later, still without Christian burial forms (Edwards, personal communication).

## 2. Settlement Site

The ground survey and study of air photographs recorded two adjoining walled enclosures, occupying the flat summit of the hill. The northernmost one has a military character.

### The Hill fortress

The location of the site is eminently defensible, with steep rocky slopes on its east, south and northeast sides, as well as the Nile on its east side. The entrance was sited on its most protected side. It has commanding views in all directions and dominates traffic along the west bank of the river at a strategic position not far of the Sabaloka rapids. Originally described by Crawford as square in shape with sides measuring 270 feet, ground survey and plotting of the air photographs showed it to be more of a parallelogram, with the north and south sides measuring 69.3 m. in length, the east wall 65.3 m. and the west wall 65.3 m. Trail diggings have shown that the four sides of the fortress were constructed of irregular sandstone blocks and mud bricks bonded with gravels and mud. Mud bricks tend to concentrate on the upper parts of the inner faces of the walls. Each mud brick measures 28 x 20x 7 cm. in size. The main walls of the fortress were of variable thickness, 4.6 m. thick along the south side, 3.6 m. thick on the east, 3.4 m. on the north and 2.9 m. thick on the north side. The walls did not survive to their full original height; the preserved remains standing 1-2 m. high. It appears to have had a parapet platform, 1-1.5 m. wide and assuming that it originally had a protective parapet wall, its



**Fig. 21: Cross-section at the north east corner of the fortress.**

original height may have been about 3.5 m. (Fig. 21). Most of the wall collapse lay on the outside.

The original plans of the bastions were not apparent to Crawford. Ground survey revealed them to be roughly square, measuring 5.3 m. on each side, projecting at each corner, with additional square bastions along the west, north and south walls. The tops of the bastions were poorly preserved but they may have stood at a higher level than the girde wall. The east wall had a large L-shaped fortified gateway, the walling being 4.7 m. thick, enclosing a narrow entrance 2.8 m. wide. Openings in the south and north walls appear to be breaches made at a later date. Two curving walls ran from the northwestern and southwestern bastions. Lower than the bastions and constructed of unmortared stonework, these appear to be secondary ad-

ditions.

The west side of the hill with a gradual slope inland was the most exposed side and it was probably in response to that a further defensive wall was erected west of the fort, extending round to join the second stone enclosure on its south side. This wall was c. 2 m. thick and not exceeding 0.75 m. high on the inside and 1.5 m. high on the outside. Constructed of dry-stone, the wall had a quite regular facing with a rubble core of smaller stones. Whether the site had secure access to the river could not be determined, as quarrying work had destroyed much of the eastern side of the hilltop.

The fort interior had a thin surface of sand and gravel with outcropping sandstone in places, especially near the centre. Numerous sherds were visible on the surface including impressed and incised potsherds similar to that found on the cemetery, painted (wheel made potsherds), and sherds with marks and drawings similar to those found at Soba. The remains of a number of stone structures were visible within the fort. Two sub rectangular structures measuring c. 6 x 8 m. were located in the southeast and southwest areas; their entrances were located on the east side. A further cluster of sites were located on the west side. Of four circular structures, three had their entrances facing west, the fifth building was rectangular. The smallest structures had a diameter of c. 1.5 m. and were probably not houses. It seems likely that the structures were made of stones quarried from

the western wall; local traditions associate them with El Sheikh Ahmed El Tayib and El Mahadi, and are used for Quranic recitation and meditation.

### The stone enclosure

Immediately south of the fortress is a second large approximately oval stone-built enclosure, measuring c.100 x 150 m. (Fig. 2). The walls were poorly preserved and less preserved than those of the fortress. Where intact fragments survived it was noted that the south, east and west walls were 3-4 m. thick, surviving 0.5-1 m. high. The northern wall had stone foundations c.3.6 m. thick with a thinner superstructure c.1.3 m. thick. It was not possible to see whether the other walls were similarly constructed due to their ruined condition. The walls were of unmortared dry stone construction with quite regular faces and a rubble core, except the eastern wall which appears less regular. A possible entrance 3-4 m. wide was identified in the north eastern part of the enclosure, again located in the most defensible location. Four stone structures, probably hut foundations were recorded within the enclosure; three were circular, 6-8 m. in diameter with entrances on the east side, the fourth sub rectangular measuring c. 8 x 9 m.. A further possible stone hut lay close to the north wall between the enclosure and the fortress. Five burial mounds were also located within the enclosure, 6-10 m. in diameter and c.0.5 m. high, very similar in construction to burial mounds elsewhere on the hill.

### Pottery and date of the fortress

The date of the main fortified site still remains uncertain. Though a large number of potsherds were recorded (1663) only two

complete vessels were found in the fortress. Most of the sherds may be of late or post-Meroitic date/early medieval. These include black polished sherds of the same type as those of the cemetery, being polished after being black smudged. Some of the sherds were red slipped and polished. These black and red slipped sherds were sometimes decorated with different incised or impressed geometrical patterns; a few were decorated with rhomboidal designs identical to those found in the graves. Some of the decorated sherds show traces of having been white or red filled. Further decorations included designs of finger tips and mat impressions. One of the complete vessels recorded is a large globular cooking pot with round knob handles at the edges of its rim (Fig. 22). This vessel is similar in form and decoration to vessel no. 643/1 of post Meriotic date from Gabati cemetery (Edwards 1998: 190).

Around 46 wheel-made potsherds were found in the fortress. All these sherds have burnished surfaces. Some are decorated with painted lines or bands of red and white. Two sherds were decorated with stamped designs. These sherds may be medieval (northern) Christian types which were also noted at Soba site. Thus, the pottery suggests a late post-Meroitic date extending to early medieval period.

Um Marrihi hill fortress resembles in plan Jebel Nakharu, opposite Berber (Crawford 1961: 17-19), the fort of Kurgus 40 km south of Abu Hamad on the east bank of the river and that at Abu Nafisa just two km north of Jebel Um Marrihi (Sjostrom 1998: 33) as well as the site of Markol in the Third Cataract region (Edwards and Osman 1994: 17). All of these sites were clearly in existence during the medieval period and the



**FIG. 22: Grey black cooking pot with mat impressed decoration. Hill fortress.**

presence of sherds of Soba Ware at Jebel Nakharu (Edwards' personal communication) suggests occupation in perhaps the sixth or seventh centuries A. D. Crawford suggested a Meroitic date for that site but the basis for this attribution is unclear<sup>(4)</sup>. The date of the other enclosure as yet cannot be determined.

### **Conclusions:**

The archaeological excavations in northern and central Sudan during the last few decades have enhanced insights into the post-Meroitic and early medieval tumulus burials. While preliminary in nature, the data from the survey and test excavations conducted at Jebel Um Marrihi contribute to the emerging picture of the various burial prac-

tices in the post-Meroitic and early medieval periods in central Sudan. It has provided some important new insights into habitation sites of the post-Meroites. To my knowledge, no habitation sites associated with post-Meroitic tumuli were ever reported.

The pottery found at the settlement and cemetery shows presence of two modes of manufacture, both handmade and wheel-made products. The former represents the majority and is probably a continuation of the aspects of the Meroitic handmade ceramic tradition. Lenoble (1992) work has indicated strong evidence for a transitional period of manufacture between the norms of Meroitic wares and post-Meroitic material. On present dating, the majority of the post-Meroitic material at Jebel Um Marrihi postdates this transitional period,

so that continuities in form or decoration are not clear. Like that of Gabati, this material may be seen as representing a later phase of developing post-Meroitic/medieval traditions in this area.

The issue of the post-Meroitic has only recently become the focus of renewed scholarly and archaeological attention and over the next decades our knowledge of it may expand and change.

**Dr. Ahmed Abuelgasim El-Hassan - College of Tourism and Archaeology - Dept. of Archaeology- King Saud University- P.O. BOX 2456 - Riyadh 11451 - Saudi Arabia- e-mail: elhassan52@hotmail.com**

ملخص: يتناول هذا البحث المسح الأثري الذي قام به الباحث بموقع جبل أم مرحي (أواسط السودان) الذي يقع على بعد ٢٨ كم شمال الخرطوم على الضفة الغربية للنيل. وعلى ضوء أعمال التنقيب التي تجرى حالياً في شمال وأواسط السودان يبدو أن الوقت ملائم لنشر نتائج هذا المسح الأثري الذي يلقي الضوء على بعض جوانب تلك المكتشفات. أما أهم المظاهر الأثرية التي تمت دراستها وتدوينها أثناء المسح فهي: (١) جبانة تضم مدافن تلال عرفت سابقاً بأسماء متعددة منها تلال "فخار علوة" و"حضارة تنقاسي" و"شبه المروية" و"ما بعد مروية". (٢) مستوطنة تضم قلعة على قمة تل صخري، وسور حجري. وتشير الدراسة الأولية لأنماط المدافن والقلعة والمعثورات الفخارية وغيرها وعينات كربون ١٤ إلى أن هذه المواقع الأثرية يمكن تأريخها للفترة المتأخرة لما بعد مروية والعصور الوسطى المبكرة.

## Notes

- (1) I deeply appreciate the continuous support and collaboration of the late Ahmed M. A. Hakem. I am indebted to John Alexander who has been instrumental and supportive during the visit he made to our excavation. Acknowledgements are due for the constructive comments and advice of D. N. Edwards, Abbas Sidahmed Mohammed Ali and Yousif M. Elamin.
- (2) The hill is also known in local traditions as Jebel el Sultan El Mansoor: Sultan el Mansoor reputedly being a figure of the later Funj period.
- (3) The initial fieldwork in 1976 was carried-out with Y. H. Medani and the results were reported in his BA Dissertation (Medani 1977).
- (4) In more recent times it is known that the site was re-occupied during the later periods of the Mahadia and during the Anglo-Egyptian occupation. It was used by the Mahdist army as a look-out post to watch the advance of the Anglo-Egyptian army, troops which occupied the hill on the 28th August 1898 and camped there (Shogair et al 1972; Zolfo 1973: 371). During the World War II an anti-aircraft gun emplacement was located on the western part of the hill (Crawford 1953: 26, 1961: 39).

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