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Sedeinga 2012. A Season of Unexpected Discoveries

Claude Rilly, Francigny Vincent

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SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Bulletin No. 17

2013





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Contents

Reports

| | | | |
|--|----|---|-----|
| Lithic Material from the Late Neolithic Site of es-Sour, Central Sudan <i>Aẓhari Mustafa Sadig</i> | 2 | Dangeil 2012: Sacred Ram – Avatar of the God Amun <i>Julie Anderson and Salah Mohamed Ahmed</i> | 70 |
| ‘Pharaonic’ Sites in the Batn el-Hajar – the ‘Archaeological Survey of Sudanese Nubia’ Revisited. <i>David N. Edwards and A. J. Mills</i> | 8 | Dangeil, A Preliminary Report on the Petrography <i>Meredith Brand</i> | 78 |
| A Note on the Akasha Rock-Inscriptions [21-S-29] <i>Vivian Davies</i> | 17 | A Third Season of Rescue Excavations in the Meroitic Cemetery at Berber, October 2012: Preliminary Report <i>Mahmoud Suliman Bashir</i> | 90 |
| Creating a Virtual Reconstruction of the Seti I Inscription at Jebel Doshā <i>Susie Green</i> | 18 | Jawgul – A Village Between Towers <i>Mariusz Drzewiecki and Piotr Maliński</i> | 101 |
| Archaeobotanical Investigations at the Gala Abu Ahmed Fortress in Lower Wadi Howar, Northern Sudan | | The Archaeology of the Medieval and Post-Medieval Fortress at Tinare in the Northern El-Mahas <i>Abdelrahman Ibrahim Saeed Ali</i> | 109 |
| The Site and the Findings <i>Friederike Jesse</i> | 24 | Upper Atbara Setiet Dam Archaeological Salvage Project (ASDASP), the Rescue Excavation Results on the Western Bank of the Atbara: Preliminary Report <i>Murtada Bushara Mohamed, Mohammed Saad Abdalab, Sami Elamien Mohammed and Zaki aldien Mahmud</i> | 113 |
| Phytoliths on Grinding Stones and Wood Charcoal Analysis <i>Barbara Eichhorn</i> | 28 | Archaeological, Ethnographical and Ecological Project of El-Ga’ab Basin in Western Dongola: A Report on the Second Season 2010 <i>Yabia Fadl Tahir</i> | 124 |
| The Fruit and Seed Remains <i>Stefanie Kablheber</i> | 33 | Surveys at the Fifth Cataract and on the Sudan Military Railway and excavations at Kawa, 2012-13 <i>Derek A. Welsby</i> | 131 |
| New Excavations at El-Kurru: Beyond the Napatan Royal Cemetery | | Archaeological Survey in El-Metemma area <i>Nada Babiker Mohammed Ibrahim</i> | 137 |
| Introduction <i>Geoff Emberling and Rachael J. Dann</i> | 42 | Archaeological Survey of Aba Island: Preliminary Report <i>Abmed Hussein Abdel Rahman Adam</i> | 142 |
| Investigating Settlement at El-Kurru <i>Geoff Emberling</i> | 43 | From Nubia to Arizona – and back; or, Reisner comes Home <i>William Y. Adams</i> | 149 |
| Geophysical Prospection in the Archaeological Settlement of El-Kurru <i>Mohamed Abdelwahab Mohamed-Ali</i> | 48 | | |
| Coring and Soundings in the El-Kurru Settlement <i>Tim Boaz Bruun Skuldbøl</i> | 50 | | |
| Five-sided Corinthian Capitals in the Mortuary Temple at El-Kurru <i>Jack Cheng</i> | 54 | | |
| Geophysical Survey at the El-Kurru cemetery <i>Ed Blinkhorn</i> | 56 | | |
| Sedeinga 2012: A Season of Unexpected Discoveries <i>Claude Rilly and Vincent Francigny</i> | 61 | | |
| The Latest Explorations at Usli, Northern Province <i>Miroslav Bárta, Lenka Suková and Vladimír Brůna</i> | 66 | | |

Miscellaneous

| | |
|---|-----|
| Obituary Michel Azim <i>Brigitte Gratian</i> | 154 |
| Review Giovanni R. Ruffini 2012. <i>Medieval Nubia. A Social and Economic History</i> <i>William Y. Adams</i> | 154 |

Front cover: The descendency of Tomb IV T 1 near Sedeinga under excavation (© V. Francigny / SEDAU).

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Sedeinga 2012: A Season of Unexpected Discoveries

Claude Rilly and Vincent Francigny

Sedeinga is located on the west bank of the Nile, in Sudanese Nubia, 160km north of Dongola. The archaeological site, halfway between the modern villages of Qubbat Selim and Nilwa, is marked by the ruins of an Egyptian temple dedicated to Queen Tiyi, Amenhotep III's Great Royal Wife, and a huge Napatan-Meroitic cemetery extending west of the temple. The necropolis is divided into three Sectors (I, II, III), separated by two *wadis*. Further west, a fourth cemetery (Sector West), located on a low hill, contains the pyramids of the local elite, which were excavated in the 1960s.

The 2012 campaign, the fourth under the new direction,¹ took place from 23rd November to 22nd December. The main purpose of the 4-year plan, presented in 2008-2009, was to understand the chronology of the burials and the development of the Meroitic necropolis in the central part of Sector II, an area where the team of Mrs Berger-El Naggar had unearthed two perpendicular rows of Kushite pyramids in the 1990s. The previous campaigns had completed the clearing of the interior of this 'L'-shaped ensemble,² surrounding areas east and north, and as far as the limits of a first funerary cluster (Cluster 1). It soon revealed that the southern part of this group was actually a second funerary cluster (Cluster 2), whose boundaries were closely intermingled with the first. Since the resumption of the excavations in 2009, 35 pyramids and about 50 associated tombs were discovered, and the northern limit (*wadi*) and eastern limit (sand quarry) of the funerary clusters were cleared.³

The 2012 campaign focused on two spots: Sector II, continuing the work of previous excavations, and a new area, which we named 'Sector IV', containing so far only one large tomb (IV T 1) and located 1.5km west of the necropolis. This second excavation was not planned, but was a salvage operation. In June 2012, during the construction of the asphalt road that will soon connect Dongola to the Egyptian border on the left bank, bulldozers cut into a deep descandary on the east side of a hill. The National Corporation for Antiquities

and Museums was informed shortly after and delegated two experts for a preliminary assessment, which confirmed that it was a large tomb, comprising two funerary chambers, and was completely empty. Six months after the discovery, we have noted that modern plunderers, likely workmen from the road construction, had in fact raked the soil of the hill to the bed-rock with a bulldozer in the hope of finding other tombs around the descandary. An excavator had even been brought to the top of the hill and its mechanical arm used to empty the sand from the bottom of the descandary, destroying almost the entire lintel, and leaving on the façade, above the entrance, the mark of its claws. All this vandalism was however, in vain, as the grave seems to have been completely isolated.⁴

The tomb was dug on the east slope of a 5m high hill, located precisely west of the axis of the temple of Tiyi. Despite recent destruction due to the road workmen, the top of the hill does not seem to have supported any superstructure, whether of brick or of stone. It seems moreover that the ground was not even been prepared for a pyramid, which might indicate that the grave was never finished. However, the recent destruction on the top of the hill renders this last point uncertain. The descandary was very finely cut in the rock, as deep as 7m for the tomb entrance (Front Cover), and was likely over 10m in length. Unfortunately, most of it is now buried under the asphalt road, and only a few steps could be unearthed during the excavation. The tomb consists of two chambers plus a niche that corresponds to the entrance of a third unfinished chamber. Modern robbers in search of a hidden 'treasure room' have partly destroyed the original layout and dug a hole in the passageway to the third room. The first room is approximately 2.1m high, 5.4m long and 5.8m

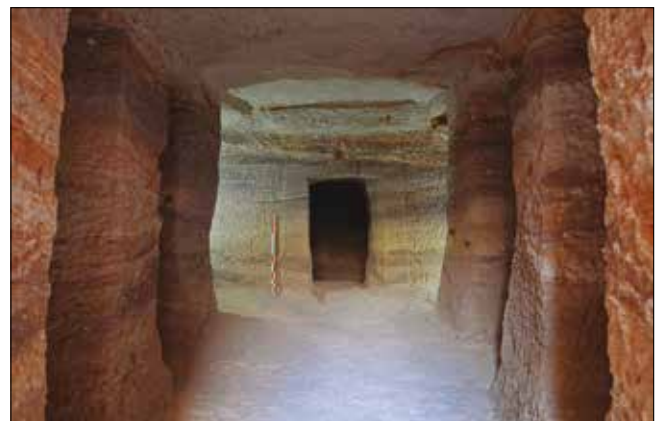


Plate 1. First room of the tomb IV T 1, with pillars and door to the second room (© V. Francigny / SEDAU).

wide. In plan it is square with rounded corners and contains four massive pillars (Plate 1). The second chamber is smaller (3.3m long and 5m wide) but just as high as the first one. Access to the chambers is through two successive doors carved with a cornice lintel decorated with a solar disk and flanked

⁴ The first investigations conducted in the neighbouring hills were fruitless.

¹ The mission consisted of Claude Rilly (director and epigraphist), Vincent Francigny (field director), Agathe Chen (anthropologist), Vincent Colard (archaeologist), Hélène Delattre (archaeologist), Romain David (ceramologist), Sandra Porez (draughtswoman) and Zerroug Bakri (NCAM inspector). We worked with 24 workmen placed under the supervision of our rais Abdelrahman Fadl, also guardian of the site. We extend our thanks to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to the Unit UMR 8167 (University of Paris-Sorbonne, Institute of Egyptology) and to the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums and its Director General, Dr Abdelrahman Ali Mohamed, for their kind help and support.

² Constituted of modest tombs without superstructures (see report of these excavations in Rilly and Francigny 2010).

³ See Rilly and Francigny 2011 and 2012.



by doorjambs. The roughly hewn contours of the lintel from the second gate, compared to the pretty good carving of the doorjambs give the impression that the work was unfinished. These were the only decorated elements discovered: no traces of fresco or relief were noted.

It required two weeks for the team of workers to empty the descandary, mostly filled with wind-blown sand, and to clean the ground floor of the tomb chambers. The grave was very likely plundered in antiquity and was almost completely empty, apart from scanty remains found in the descandary, before the entrance, sealed by two millennia of sand deposit. A human skull and a few human and animal bones (some were the legs of a small dog)⁵ were discovered along with a pottery sherd from a cup and fragments of ceramics associated with charcoal.

The tomb was obviously meant for a high ranking deceased but its dating is uncertain given the few elements at our disposal. At first view, with its large rounded rooms and absence of superstructure, it was reminiscent of some of the tombs discovered in Hillat el-Arab near Jebel Barkal, that have been ascribed to the end of the New Kingdom.⁶ However, none of the tombs of Hillat el-Arab include decorated lintels with an engraved sun-disk, which is attested for the Napatan and early Meroitic royal graves only.⁷ More precisely, the architectural features of Tomb IV T 1 match closely several royal graves in Barkal North and Begrawiya North, namely Bar.5, 7, 8 and Beg.N.7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13.⁸ All the substructures of these tombs include three chambers with pillars in the two first rooms and most of them have doors, when preserved, decorated with cornices and doorjambs. The dimensions and the rounded shape of the rooms also match the tomb found in Sedeinga. Among these royal graves, Bar.5 and Beg.N.8 (Figure 1) are very similar to IV T 1, with a first room containing four pillars, a second room with two pillars, and finally a small funerary chamber (initially planned at Sedeinga). This group of royal counterparts of the Sedeinga tomb can be dated to the second half of the 2nd century BC, around the reigns of Taneyidamani (Beg.N.12) and his mother, maybe Queen Nahirqo (Beg.N.11).⁹ This time frame, around the late 2nd century BC, has been recently confirmed

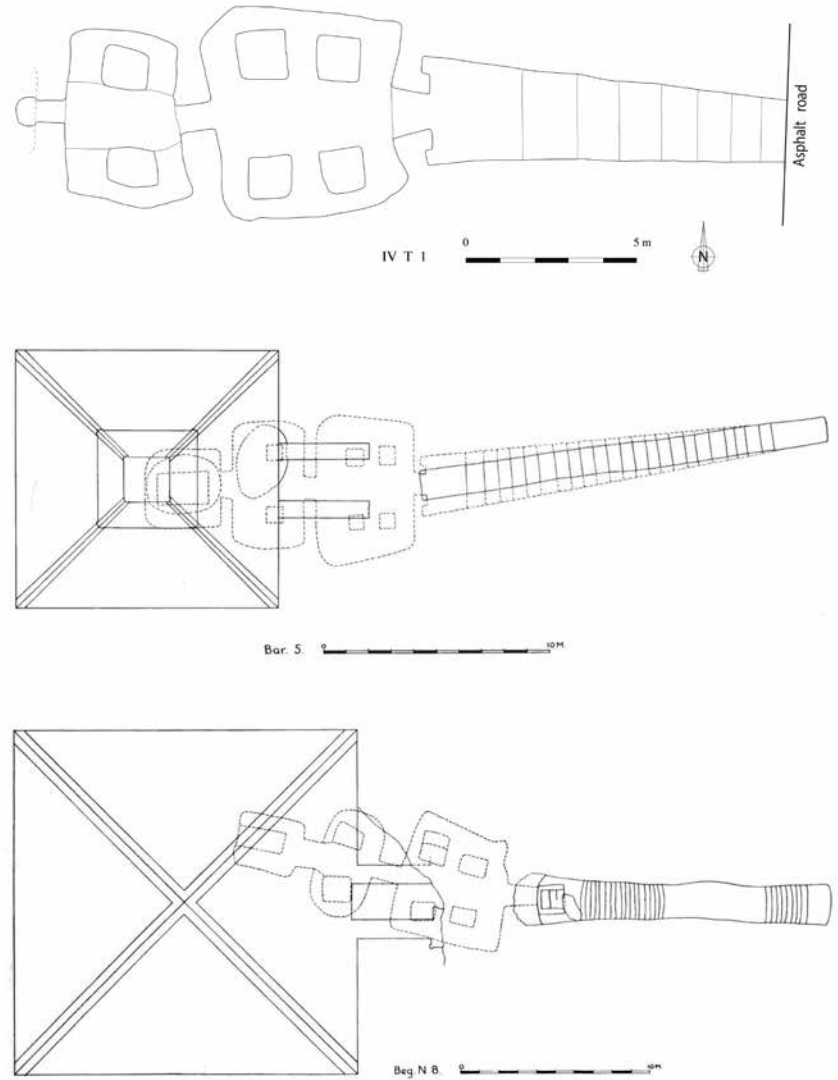


Figure 1. Substructures comparison between Sedeinga IV T 1 (© V. Francigny / SEDA), Bar.5 and Beg.N.8 (Dunham 1963).

by C¹⁴ date obtained from the charcoal associated with the ceramic deposit found near the entrance of IV T 1. The results, which were received at the time when this article was being prepared, yielded a calibrated date of between 197 BC and 43 BC (95% probability), which fits with the architectural comparison above.

We still have to understand why a tomb with royal architectural standards was constructed in Sedeinga and why, in all likelihood, it was never completed. This period was marked by alternative burials in Meroe and Barkal, which lasted until the first decades AD and for which no other explanation has been so far given other than unclear ‘dynastic troubles’.¹⁰ Was this a frustrated attempt from a scion of a royal lineage to establish a third location for royal burials? Was the central administration so weak as to allow a local governor to build such a royal monument for his burial? Some Napatan tombs in Sedeinga, especially in the elite cemetery (Sector West),

⁵ We thank Louis Chaix for the identification of these animal bones.
⁶ See Vincentelli 2006, particularly Tomb ARA 7 with pillars (33-39), and ARA 18 (121-127).

⁷ Dunham 1950, 127 (type III, “entrance moulded with cornice”).

⁸ Dunham 1957, 55 (Bar.7), 59-62 (Bar.8), 63-65 (Beg.N.7), 66-67 (Beg.N.9), 68-71 (Beg.N.8), 72-74 (Beg.N.11), 74-75 (Beg.N.12) and 81-82 (Beg.N.13).

⁹ Surely not Queen Shanakdakhete, as repeatedly suggested: see Rilly 2011, 183-184.

¹⁰ See Török 1997, 461 and n. 286 with further references.

are of great dimensions with two-chamber substructures, but they never contain internal pillars and sun-disk lintels, all elements that are unattested in non-royal graves (Dunham 1950, 127, 130).¹¹ This unexpected discovery raises more questions than answers for the time being.

In Sector II of the necropolis, fieldwork was carried out continuously throughout the campaign, with a smaller team during the two weeks devoted to IV T 1. The core of Cluster 2 (Figure 2) was reached: it includes a sort of central esplanade (A) bordered in the east with a row of three ancient large pyramids, each flanked by a later pyramid built upon the ruins of the former chapel and reusing the original descendary (B). In the elite cemetery of Sector West, six late monuments were similarly built immediately east of earlier pyramids, constituting ‘coupled pyramids’, as the early team named them.

Thirteen tombs were excavated this season, yielding a limited number of objects because of repeated plundering. Among this material, two well-preserved *lecythi* were found in II T 242, as well as many fragments of painted fabric glued to the wood from a coffin in II T 231 (Plate 2).¹² Several of them comprised gilded sections, which seem to be the first evidence of this technique for Napatan-Meroitic coffins. No Meroitic inscription was found in this central part of Cluster 2. Fragments of offering-tables, which were mostly discovered in the remains of the chapels, were made of terracotta and devoid of texts. These elements, in addition to the fine carving of graves entrances, as well as the presence of stairs in several descendaries, point more to the Napatan period than to the Meroitic period. An early dating is confirmed by the discovery of the upper part of a ‘torpedo’ amphora produced between the 6th and the mid 3rd century BC (Marangou and Marchand 2007, 254), and usually associated in Nubia with Napatan sites (Ruffieux 2005, 258; Welsby Sjöström and Thomas 2011, fig. 2.1). Therefore, it seems that this area of the necropolis is covering the transition between the late Napatan and the early Meroitic period, with a phase during the late Meroitic period where the oldest graves were reused.

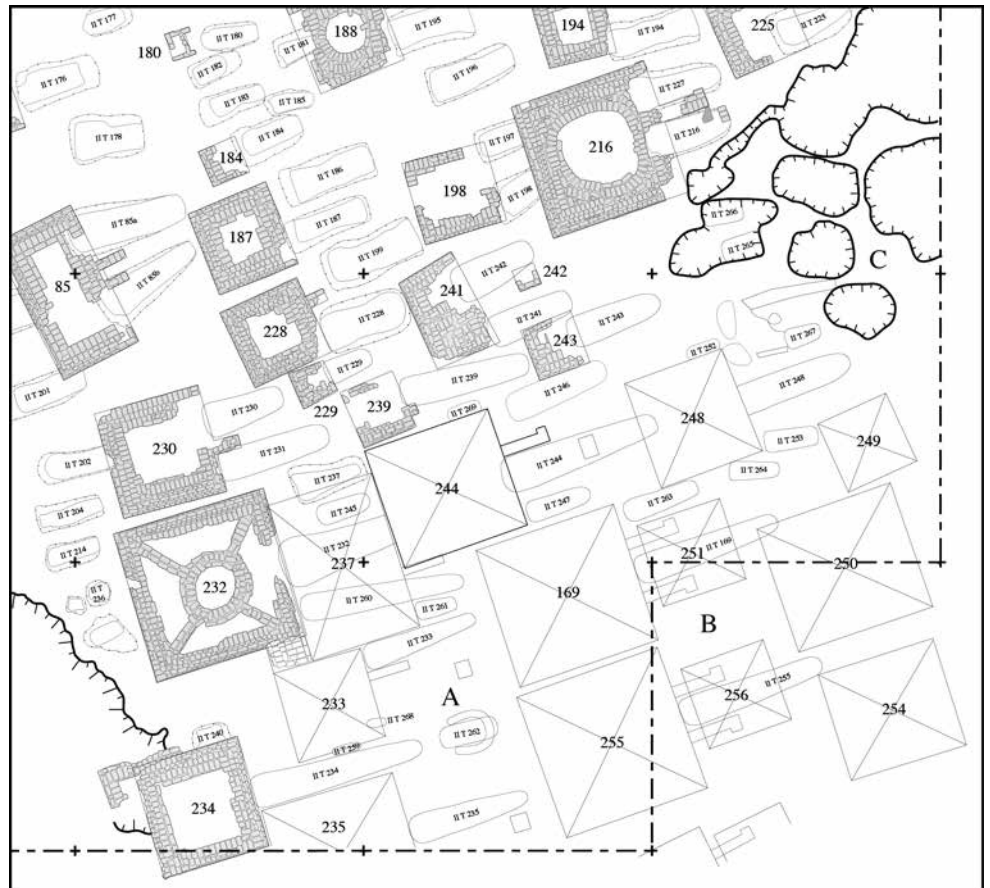


Figure 2. Plan of the excavations in Sector II (© V. Francigny / SEDAU).



Plate 2. Painted fabric decoration from a coffin (© V. Francigny / SEDAU).

No new pyramids were discovered this year because of the long time spent on the large grave IV T 1. The clearing of Pyramid 169 revealed that it contained, as Pyramids 188, 216, 232 and 250 did, an internal cupola, very small in this case (about 400mm in diameter), linked to the angles by diagonal cross-braces, as in Pyramid 232. Another unexpected discovery strengthened our hypotheses concerning this architectural device. On the esplanade, we unearthed the undisturbed tomb of an immature individual (II T 262) made of a lateral burial chamber opening onto a deep shaft. The skeleton (Plate 3) was still wearing three necklaces and a

¹¹ There could be an exception at Kawa, where a rectangular boss was left on the lintel of the grave P3, probably for carving a sun-disk (Welsby 2011, 59, pl. 10).

¹² For further examples of the same technique in Sector II of Sedeinga, see Berger-El Naggar 2008, 184 (fig. 4) and 185.



Plate 3. Lateral niche grave II T 262, with immature individual in situ (© V. Francigny / SEDAU).



Plate 4. Necklace of drop-shape beads in blue-glazed faience separated by discoid beads found in II T 262 (© V. Francigny / SEDAU).

blue faience amulet in the shape of the god Shu, of Napatan workmanship (Plates 4 and 5)¹³ and, around the ankles, two copper-alloy rings. The specific feature of this tomb appeared in its superstructure, an oval tumulus built over the shaft with sandy soil in the middle and mud bricks at the circumference. As it is clear that no cogent architectural reason could explain inner cupolas in pyramids, we proposed two theories in previous papers:¹⁴ first, a solar symbol; or second, a blending of two superstructure traditions, namely the tumulus, which was the local and ancient superstructure still used in the south of the kingdom in non-royal contexts, and the pyramid, that is the superstructure used in the north of the kingdom and of Egyptian origin. The discovery of Tomb II T 262, where a brick cupola imitates a tumulus but is not yet integrated into a pyramidal superstructure, gives more verisimilitude to the second hypothesis.

¹³ We thank Dr Joanna Then-Obluska for this information. Parallels for one of the necklaces, made of serrated lentoid beads in blue-glazed faience, are known from Napatan burials of children at Sanam (Tomb 1213, see Griffith 1923, pl. LX, 11) and Missiminia (Tomb 2V6/67, see Vila 1980, 50-55, fig. 39-5). Several instances of Shu-amulets in similar burials are also known (see for example Meroe, Beg.W.643, Dunham 1963, 41 / 23-M-306 and fig. 28a).

¹⁴ See Rilly and Francigny 2011, 74.



Plate 5. Fragmentary Napatan Shu-amulet from II T 262 (© V. Francigny / SEDAU).

One last discovery in this sector is of much significance, not for the Napatan period but rather for the Egyptian colonization period during the 18th Dynasty. In Tomb II T 244, dug for a Napatan woman, a relief panel from the Temple of Tihi was reused as a funerary bench (Figure 3, Plate 6). It was carved to match the coffin dimensions (1.77 x 0.4m) but the image of Amun was carefully preserved. This divine figure must have been originally located in the upper part of a wall of the temple, and followed by the figure of the deified Amenhotep III, whose cartouche, though it is cut in half, is to be seen on the left, preceded by the ritual formula inscribed next to the gods, 'words to be said by'. The name of Amun as well as his face were first hammered out and later carved anew, proving that the persecution of this god extended to this remote province during the reign of Akhenaton and that his images were restored during the following reigns. The fact that these religious instructions given by the central power in Egypt were carefully enforced in the region is proven by several instances in Soleb and in a broken stela found reused likewise in a Meroitic tomb from Sector II at Sedeinga. Yet this is the first known example on a wall from the Temple of Tihi. This detail also confirms that this monument was already ruined during the late Napatan/early Meroitic period.

Finally, during the last week of this 2012 season, a working area was cleared to the east of the burial field, at the edge of a second sand quarry. Pits for the preparation of mortar were discovered (C). Post-holes, that might have supported a roof, as well as a small wall of mud bricks built on the northern face to protect the area from the wind, indicate that the workmen employed for the pyramid building used to rest and work here under a basic shelter.

The next season will be primarily used for the preparation of a publication on this part of Sector II. The next four-year program, which was planned to deal with the transition from Napatan to Meroitic in the necropolis, was decided before



Plate 6. Upper part of a panel with a representation of Amun found in II T 244 (© V. Francigny / SEDAU).

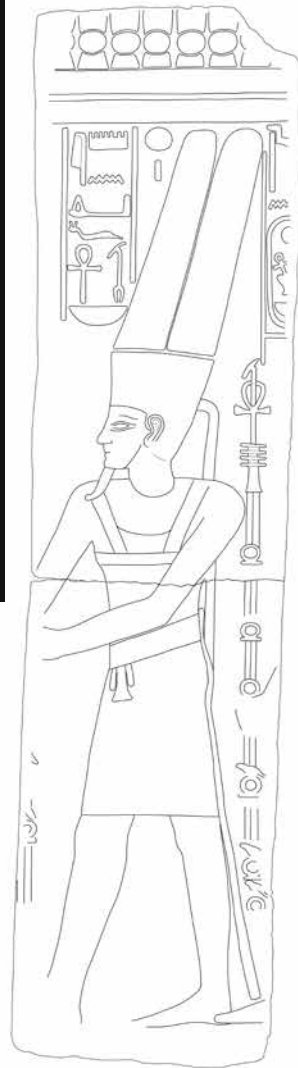


Figure 3. Facsimile of a panel with a representation of Amun found in II T 244 (© V. Francigny / SEDAU).



this season's discoveries. Ironically, it is now obvious that the area presently under excavation will remain the best place for this new study.

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Gabati

A Meroitic, Post-Meroitic and Medieval
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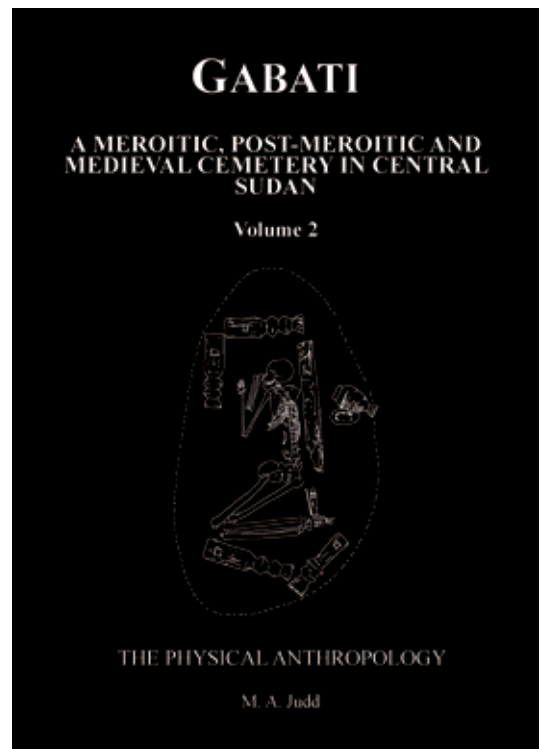
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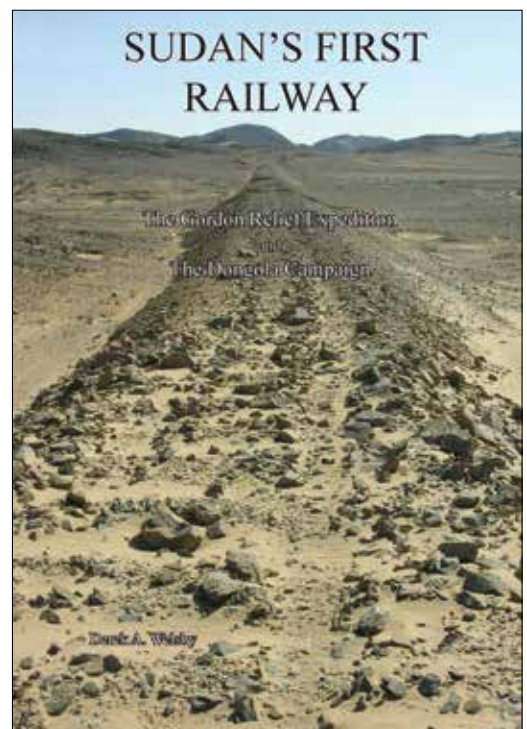
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Khartoum. The Republican Palace, once the Governor General's residence, in 1968 (photo SARS Hawkes Archive HAW P091.01).



Khartoum. The Anglican cathedral in 1968. Now minus its bell tower it houses the Republican Palace Museum (photo SARS Hawkes Archive HAW P090.01).