

INSTITUT DES CULTURES MÉDITERRANÉENNES ET ORIENTALES  
DE L'ACADÉMIE POLONAISE DES SCIENCES

ÉTUDES et TRAVAUX  
XXVII  
2014

MARIUSZ DRZEWIECKI, TOMASZ STĘPNIK

*Fortified Sites at the Mouth of Wadis  
Case Study of Abu Sideir and Abu Mereikh  
in the Fifth Cataract Region*

Questions regarding the origin of fortified sites arise wherever such buildings come under investigation. It is assumed that only organised, hierarchical societies were capable of their construction. The existence of social inequalities is indicated by the architecture of the fortifications, which separates, providing greater protection for the area enclosed within its walls. This division can be interpreted on the basis of dualism (structural opposition) – that which is inside compared to that which is outside. If the reasoning process is reversed, one starts to consider just how closely connected the fortifications are to the external context which surrounds them and the extent to which the analysis of this context can provide the answers to questions about the fortifications themselves. These relations are put to the test in the *Fortresses of Sudan* project studying the fortified sites located in the Middle Nile valley.<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on two examples in the Fifth Nile Cataract region and attempts to link the fortifications to a model of socio-political relations.

## THE MODEL – GENERAL ASSUMPTIONS

The most common explanation for why these fortifications were built along the Nile is the wish to control the river and its fertile banks. The Nile was the main transportation route.<sup>2</sup> Whoever controlled the river also supervised trade as well as transport and therefore was able, to a certain extent, to influence the flow of people up and down river and also between the Eastern and Bayuda deserts. Additionally, in this part of the world, water in itself was a valuable natural resource for farmers and herders, especially during the dry season. These two economies conditioned, and indeed emerged from, the way and rhythm of life for those involved.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the calendar of the settled peoples who were mainly involved in farming was most often dictated by plant vegetation cycles. The nomadic peoples bred livestock, including cattle and camels, and followed their herds from pasture to pasture, often over long distances. The size of the herds was actually one of the factors which forced them to keep moving, as no region was able to support such large numbers of animals for any great length of time.<sup>4</sup> The daily life and migration of the herders was likewise linked to nature, in particular to areas where water and pasture were available, and all this was governed mainly by the seasons: rainy and dry. Any interaction between the two economic groups, the farmers and herders, usually occurred near permanent water

---

<sup>1</sup> M. DRZEWIECKI, W. RĄCZKOWSKI, Following O.G.S. Crawford: satellite images and field archaeology in Sudan, [in:] R. Lasaponara, N. Masini (Eds), *Remote Sensing for Archaeology and Cultural Heritage Management*, Rome 2008, pp. 3–6; M. DRZEWIECKI, P. POLKOWSKI, Fortified Sites in the Area of the Fifth and Sixth Cataract in Contexts. Preliminary Reflections, *GAMAR*, in press; M. DRZEWIECKI, Ufortyfikowane założenia architektoniczne w kontekście osadniczym w Górnej Nubii w czasach królestwa Makurii, unpublished PhD thesis, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań 2013; online resource: <https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/jspui/handle/10593/4130>.

<sup>2</sup> W.Y. ADAMS, *Nubia: Corridor to Africa*, London-Princeton 1977, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> R.J. BRADLEY, *Nomads in the Archaeological Record: case studies in the northern province of the Sudan, Meroitica* 13, Berlin 1992 [= *Nomads*], pp. 150–153.

<sup>4</sup> M. ZĄBEK, *Arabowie z Dar Hamid. Społeczność w sytuacji zagrożenia ekologicznego*, Warszawa 1998 [= *Arabowie*], p. 84.

sources. This interaction may have been peaceful (cooperation, exchange, trade, etc.) or hostile (raids, destruction of fields, restricting access to pastures and water, etc.).<sup>5</sup>

The cataract zones, in relation to these considerations, are distinctive in that they came about as the river Nile was forced to divide when it encountered an area of rocks far more resistant to the current than in other sections of the course of the river.<sup>6</sup> So these zones feature a rocky landscape intersected by the channels of the Nile and the *wadi* valleys which wind through the hills in their search for an exit into the lowest lands. Even up to the twentieth century, the transport routes in such regions ran either alongside the river or followed the *wadis*. On the one hand, this led to the isolation of some hard-to-reach places, whilst on the other, to the concentration of settlements along the river and where large *wadis* entered the Nile valley.

Insofar as we know today, no significant political power centre had formed in the region of the Fifth Cataract up to the end of the medieval period. In those times this area was border terrain between the Kingdoms of Makuria and Alwa. Earlier, in the Meroitic period, the main centres of power lay south of the Fifth Cataract. Thus, it is probable that the fortifications were built on the orders of authorities from beyond the Fifth Cataract region. If their role was to supervise the settled peoples and those who travelled through the area then the fortifications ought to have been located at points where nomadic groups and settlers traditionally met. This would have permitted the representatives of the ruling body to secure trade, protect the people and at the same time control both communities.

## NOMADS AND THEIR HERDS

It is generally accepted that the opportunities for animal husbandry in northern Sudan are much the same today as they were in the Middle Ages.<sup>7</sup> However, many authors note advancing desertification, the result of increased human activity in the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> On this basis a primary assumption can be made that medieval nomads in the Fifth Cataract region and further north could breed camels on a large scale. Cattle, which are far more demanding in terms of the regularity and amount of water needed and also require higher quality pastures, were not kept by the nomads who migrated across the deserts of northern Sudan. Nomadic cattle herding was possible on a large scale when rainfall was high and quality fodder available. Such conditions can currently be found in central and southern Sudan and in Eritrea. They may well have been present in the Fifth Cataract region from ancient times up to the Meroitic period.<sup>9</sup> Camel herding could have become popular in Sudanese lands at the beginning of our era. This would account for the increase

<sup>5</sup> A. MOHAMMED, *The Nomad and the Sedentary: Polar Complementaries – Not Polar Opposites*, [in:] C. Nelson (Ed.), *The Desert and the Sown*, Berkeley 1973, pp. 97–112.

<sup>6</sup> A.J. WHITEMAN, *The Geology of the Republic of Sudan*, Oxford 1971, pp. 39–43.

<sup>7</sup> D.N. EDWARDS, *Archaeology and Settlement in Upper Nubia in the 1<sup>st</sup> Millennium A.D.*, *BAR-IS* 537, Oxford 1989 [= *Archaeology*], p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> D.A. WELSBY, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia Pagans, Christians and Muslims along the Middle Nile*, London 2002 [= *Medieval Kingdoms*], pp. 8–9; EDWARDS, *Archaeology*, pp. 26–27.

<sup>9</sup> W.Y. ADAMS, *Ecology and Economy in the Empire of Kush*, *ZĀS* 108, 1981, pp. 1–11.

in camel motifs among rock drawings from that time.<sup>10</sup> John the Deacon writes that in the eighth century, riders on camels made up a large part of the Makurian army.<sup>11</sup> In time, camel herding became one of the main sources of income for the nomads of northern and central Sudan.

In the comparison of twentieth century cattle and camel herding, differences emerge which enrich our model. Cattle had a major role in the nomadic pastoral societies of southern Sudan – providing food, fuel, skins, bones, horns. Herding methods dictated life according to the need to move with the animals and also build seasonal settlements – the only trace of which could have been the remains of hearths and/or ephemeral structures, some sort of shelters to provide protection from the wind or other local difficulties. One characteristic of this type of culture was the small amount of usually moveable material. Observations of nomadic cultures reveal that broken objects were often repaired or used for another purpose, and waste, usually organic, was either consumed by wild animals or disintegrated due to the climate.<sup>12</sup> The significance of cattle was also reflected in customs and religion. The size of the herd one man possessed was an indication of wealth, by which position within society was measured. As Edward Evans-Pritchard, a twentieth century researcher into the customs of the Nuer pastoral tribe in Sudan writes: *for all, men, women, children, cattle were precious, a continuous source of pride and joy, but also a reason for caution, worry and disagreements. Cattle feature in the life of the Nuer from birth till death. It is easy to understand therefore why the Nuer dedicate so much attention to cattle. Nor is it surprising why cattle are the focus of more conversations than anything else, and why the Nuer have such a rich vocabulary relating to these animals and their needs.* Strong attachments were formed to cattle, especially amongst boys to the ox they received from their fathers as part of their initiation. A young man would be named after his ox and he would take it out for walks, sing songs about it and make up poems.<sup>13</sup> This extraordinary relationship with cattle was reflected in art and the religions of pastoral cultures.

In the case of camel herding the situation seems rather different. In the twentieth century the peoples of Dar Hamid<sup>14</sup> and the Kababish tribes<sup>15</sup> of Kordofan were examples of specialised camels-pastoral communities. Nomadic life was tied to optimal breeding conditions, according to the nomads. The size of the herd was an indication of social status and camels were held in high prestige. The only difference was in their beliefs. The main religion in northern Kordofan currently is folk Islam. But what were their traditions prior to their conversion to Islam? It is difficult to say, though if we use the Beja tribe as an example they were nominally classified as Christian.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> C. KLEINITZ, Rock art at the Fourth Nile Cataract: An overview, [*in:*] H.P. Wotzka (Ed.), Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Archaeology of the Fourth Nile Cataract, University of Cologne, 13–14 July 2006, *Africa Praehistorica* 22, Köln 2012 [= Rock art], p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> G. VANTINI, Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia, Heidelberg-Warsaw 1975 [= Oriental Sources], p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> BRADLEY, Nomads, pp. 58, 129; EDWARDS, Archaeology, pp. 150–151.

<sup>13</sup> E.E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, Religia Nuerów, Kęty 2007 [= Religia], pp. 308–313.

<sup>14</sup> ZĄBEK, Arabowie, p. 69.

<sup>15</sup> BRADLEY, Nomads, pp. 35–37.

<sup>16</sup> VANTINI, Oriental Sources, p. 148.

## NOMADIC REMAINS IN THE REGION OF ABU SIDEIR AND ABU MEREIKH

According to the nomadic herding model presented above several indicators emerge which may be used to verify the past existence of pastoral groups in this region. The first is the presence of temporary settlements with a small amount of archaeological material (most often pottery kitchenware fragments, occasionally other household objects), and ephemeral traces of permanent architecture limited mainly to the remains of huts/shelters. Furthermore, if the herd, especially cattle, held a symbolic meaning as discussed earlier in the case of the Nuer, then it should be possible to determine some religious aspects in relation to these animals at the sites.

As part of the *Fortresses of Sudan* project, fieldwalking reconnaissance was performed of the area around the fortifications at Abu Sideir, Abu Mereikh B and C. It was carried out in January 2012. Taking the above hypotheses into account it is necessary to note the sites where only pottery fragments were found. There were clusters of severely eroded fragments of kitchenware, invariably handmade and not decorated. Ephemeral stone structures, possibly the remains of temporary camps or seasonal settlements could be seen, especially around Abu Sideir. Settlements of this type were located within the *wadis*. We observed three types of structures on these sites. Most clearly visible in the landscape were circular stone buildings<sup>17</sup> built without the use of mortar, the remains of which reached up to a maximum height of one metre and whose entrance was clearly marked by a stone threshold and vertical stone slabs forming a kind of jamb (**Fig. 6**). The entrances were usually placed on the southern side of the buildings. The walls were built using slabs of local stone. The upper section of the walls and the roof – most probably cone-shaped – are presumed to have been made of organic material, wood and grass, which did not survive. We also noticed that buildings of this type were to be found in the higher sections of the *wadi* valley or on the edge of elevations clearly overlooking the rest of the settlement.

The majority of the settlement buildings were characteristic semi-circular walls of stone also built without using mortar.<sup>18</sup> The fact that these structures were low, rarely reaching above 30cm in height and with an internal diameter measuring roughly 2m, occasionally up to 3m, indicates that their purpose was to stabilise a light construction of wood with walls of fabric or animal skins. Such buildings were usually found in the lower sections of the *wadis* or on the valley floor. A common characteristic of these settlements was a small amount of ceramic remains or often none at all.

At least three categories of features that could be considered a material indication of religion were recorded during fieldwork:

- rock drawings – recorded at both Abu Sideir, and Abu Mereikh;
- stone circles with stelae – registered in the Abu Sideir region only;

---

<sup>17</sup> Similar to type SS06 after Z. BORCOWSKI, D.A. WELSBY, The Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project (MDASP): Provisional type series of monuments, [*in:*] H.P. Wotzka (Ed.), Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Archaeology of the Fourth Nile Cataract, University of Cologne, 13–14 July 2006, *Africa Praehistorica* 22, Cologne 2012 [= Merowe Dam], pp. 28–29 (version – December 2009, online resource: <http://www.nubiansociety.org/PDF/MDASP/MDASP-TypeSeries12-09.pdf>; access date: May 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Similar to type SS10 after BORCOWSKI, WELSBY, Merowe Dam, pp. 28–29.

- cemeteries – the majority of which were in the region of Abu Mereikh, a smaller number in Abu Sideir.

In the comparison of the petroglyphs recorded around Abu Sideir [= AS] and Abu Mereikh [= AM], we see that images of cattle, often only one, or in small groups of 2–5, dominate the engravings in AS. In total in the AS region around 100 scenes showing cattle were registered, however in AM we came across only three images of a single cow and one of a group of cattle (**Figs 11–13**). In AS, apart from one scene which is unclear, no camels were registered, whereas in AM images of camels – whether singular, in groups or even in more complicated scenes – were in the majority. In AS rarely were there any anthropomorphs, five scenes in total showed human figures on foot and possibly three riders (only one is clear) in smaller group scenes (**Figs 13, 14, 17**). In AM the majority were complex scenes with several figures on foot, riders (mainly on camel), frequently shown in warrior poses and holding weapons. In both locations scenes of wild animals were quite rare – in AS there were some giraffes (**Fig. 15**) and a crocodile, and in AM ostriches (**Fig. 16**), a scorpion and an antelope.

The differences in the subject matter presented are interesting. In AS the engravings were most likely made by the pastoral tribes, for whom the main motif was cattle in various configurations but mainly individual scenes. However, in AM herds of camel and riders are shown in large and complex scenes. The central motif was often battle or ritual, during which weaponry was presented (**Figs 18, 19**).

The various techniques used, as well as the degree of patination may indicate that these rock engravings were made across a wide temporal range.<sup>19</sup> In the case of AS, cattle were the main subject matter for a long time. Anthropomorphs were shown relatively rarely and a characteristic of these scenes is the absence of a display of aggressive behaviour or weapons. Wild animals hardly appear at all, which may indicate that these species were of little interest to the engravers themselves.<sup>20</sup>

Dating the petroglyphs is very difficult but in a few places scenes from different periods are superimposed. One such scene, for example, shows a man holding a cow by the tail in one hand and a lasso-type object in the other. Next to this, in a different technique, there is a rider on horseback, below which the words *At-taība* in Arabic partly overlap one of the cows (**Fig. 17**). These images have various levels of patination. Similar cases of overlapping images and differences in the degree to which the engravings have been eroded can be found in the clusters of drawings located in one gallery, approximately 100m long, where the *wadi* enters the Nile valley (site AS23) (**Fig. 1**). It is likely that the presence of

<sup>19</sup> In some cases right up to modern times. We came across single, schematically-made scenes, symbols and writing and alongside there were abandoned tools – stone pestles. However, it is important to remember that the word *art* as we understand it, does not necessarily exist in the vocabulary of tribal societies. From the perspective of their creator, the rock drawings most often have a very practical meaning (A. ROZWADOWSKI, *Obrazy z przeszłości. Hermeneutyka sztuki naskalnej*, Poznań 2009 [= *Obrazy*], pp. 29–35).

<sup>20</sup> Hunting for wild animals amongst the pastoral tribes of the Nuer in southern Sudan was considered to be an activity for the poor who did not possess enough cattle to eat the meat of the animals they bred and this indicated the hunter lacked good pastoral skills (EVANS-PRITCHARD, *Religia*, p. 21; VANTINI, *Oriental Sources*, p. 161).

old engravings encouraged new drawings to be made, even though their symbolic meaning may have been completely different.

The rock drawings discovered in the AS region can be divided into three groups according to technique. In the first, the creator was operating within the surface plane. These are the most carefully drawn and well-made scenes. Attempts were made to portray individual markings, e.g. stripes on the cows or the shape of the horns. The images in the second group were made in outline only, and the third group were pecked into the rock (with a large tool). These engravings were executed quickly and roughly and seem to be the latest of the petroglyphs, some are most certainly modern. As there were many rock groups suitable for petroglyphs it is quite clear that a choice was made for particular sites. In many cultures the rock art sites are thought to be places where power is focused, a type of *gateway to another world*.<sup>21</sup> The *wadi* mouth in the Nile valley may have signalled the end of one stage of the never-ending nomadic trek. Perhaps some rituals were connected to these places? Judging by the number of engravings here, this seems quite likely. The question is, are we in a position to interpret their meaning and symbolism? But for the purposes of this paper, the identification of scenes will suffice. Even if the artists did not aim to reflect reality they might in fact, have done so. They passed on information regarding the type of economy, which animals were bred and thus the climate and environment, types of weapons, how battles were fought and so on. Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that these scenes do not necessarily show all the aspects of the everyday life of those communities.<sup>22</sup>

In some of the Abu Sideir settlements a number of stone constructions, mostly circular in outline, were recorded although their purpose remains unclear. Most often these were stone circles with the stones carefully placed flat. We registered stone circles at two sites (AS4 and AS11). The circle at AS4 (**Figs 1 and 8**) is similar in size to domestic buildings and is particularly interesting. Darker stones had been laid on the interior of the wall whilst on the external side the stones were lighter in colour. There were two stone stelae on the eastern side, but they were too small and too close together to form an entrance. The internal diameter measured approximately 2.5m. By comparison, at AS11 the stone circle was about 6m in diameter and the edges were marked by regularly spaced narrow stone slabs which had been positioned vertically into the ground forming a kind of stela. One more but slightly different object was recorded on site AS4, the stone stela here marked out a square area measuring 1.5 x 1.5m. No pottery sherds or other artefacts were recorded.

This combination of stone circles and vertically placed slabs has been recorded in various regions of North-East Africa. However, archaeological survey of such places is rarely carried out. One of the exceptions is the Wadi Khashab project in the Eastern Desert, south-eastern Egypt. The expedition team carried out trial trenches within a much bigger circle. The stone circle in Wadi Khashab measured 18m in diameter and the vertical stone slabs were up to 2m in height. Cattle bones were found within its circumference.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> ROZWADOWSKI, *Obrazy*, pp. 168–169.

<sup>22</sup> It may be interpreted as *images of the mind*, cf. KLEINITZ, *Rock art*, p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> Piotr Osypiński personal comment.

The feature was classified as a site of ‘cult’. This analogy indicates the possibility exists to connect the rock engravings and the stone circles of Abu Sideir with rituals in which cattle played an important role. Without further investigation, this connection remains a potential hypothesis.

The third category mentioned earlier, cemeteries, raises even more problems. In the AS region only a small number of tumuli cemeteries were recorded. Do they belong to the people who settled in the river valley or are they of the nomads? This has yet to be established. Fieldwalking did not reveal any connection between cattle and these sites.<sup>24</sup> In the case of AM the number and diversity of the cemeteries is much greater. Muslim graves have been recorded here as have Christian box graves and tumuli of varying sizes (from a few metres up to 28m in diameter).

### DATING OF THE FORTIFIED SITES

The Abu Sideir and Abu Mereikh fortifications are in the Fifth Cataract region, about 600–700m north of the point where large *wadis* join the Nile valley, on the edge of the river flood plain.<sup>25</sup> The fortification in Abu Sideir is not far from Karaba village on the right bank of the Nile, so bordering the Eastern Desert (**Fig. 1**). Abu Mereikh on the other hand is part of Suleymaniya village on the left bank, just on the periphery of the Bayuda desert (**Fig. 2**). These locations are about 13km apart. We will attempt to compare the settlement context of the two sites within a radius of approximately 2km from the fortifications and assess just how the model outlined above is reflected empirically, or rather in this instance, archaeologically.

In January 2012, as part of the *Fortresses of Sudan* project, a geomatic survey was carried out of the fortified sites in Abu Sideir and Abu Mereikh B and C, photographic documentation was taken and descriptions recorded. On the basis of the material acquired it is possible to make the following initial assumptions regarding dating:

- Abu Sideir (**Fig. 3**) has its origins in the medieval period.<sup>26</sup> The fortifications were built entirely from stone. The face of the enclosure walls was made of closely-fitted, irregular fragments of local rock (up to 0.5m long). The complex consists of two separate courtyards. There are also bastions which are either circular or rectangular. Three potential gateways were recorded, all with additional defences. These features may indicate that the fortifications were built during the period of the Makuria and Alwa kingdoms. Only circular and semi-circular ephemeral stone constructions were registered within the fortifications. Artefacts recorded on the surface were mainly ceramic

---

<sup>24</sup> Background of these considerations is the publication of the discovery of the burial of cows, D.A. WELSBY, The Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project Survey and excavations in the vicinity of ed-Dome (AKSE) and et-Tereif (AKSCW) 2006–2007, *SudNub* 11, 2007, p. 18.

<sup>25</sup> K.A. EISA, The history and antiquities of Karaba-Sheriek in the Middle Nile Region, *ANM* 7, 1995, pp. 53–58; Y.M. EL-AMIN, D.N. EDWARDS, Archaeological Survey in the Fifth Cataract Region, *SudNub* 4, 2000, pp. 33–50.

<sup>26</sup> EISA, *ANM* 7, 1995, p. 54; M. DRZEWIECKI, T. STĘPNIK, Fortresses of Sudan Project. Abu Sideir case study, *SudNub* 16, 2012, pp. 96–99.



kitchenware fragments. Some pieces were decorated and can be classified as Fung period or later.<sup>27</sup>

- Abu Mereikh C (**Fig. 4**) is from the late- or post-Meroitic period(?). On the basis of the pottery fragments found on the surface the remains can be preliminarily linked to the Meroitic period. The remains of the fortifications are barely visible on the surface and for this reason it was not possible to carry out detailed architectural analysis.<sup>28</sup> However, the regular shape of the fortifications (approx. 57 x 47m) is similar to other fortifications in this part of the Nile valley which have been dated to the late-/post-Meroitic period.<sup>29</sup>
- Abu Mereikh B (**Fig. 5**) is medieval/modern. Of the fortifications investigated here, this is the most poorly preserved. Modern buildings overlaying the fortifications significantly added to the damage and the site have been exploited as a source of building material. The pottery fragments recorded on the surface are likewise very small and eroded pieces. Abu Mereikh B was irregular in shape and within its walls there was quite a large building (approx. 30 x 28m), the remains of which can be seen as a low *kom*. If we assume that these are the remains of a church, then it was not oriented on an east-west axis.

In summary then, the fortifications in Abu Sideir and Abu Mereikh B were in use at some point during the wide time frame of the medieval period, whereas Abu Mereikh C was built somewhat earlier – in the late-/post-Meroitic period. At this time Nubian kingdoms were being created and in existence in the Nile valley and the region of the Fifth Cataract is often interpreted as a border zone between medieval Makuria and Alwa.<sup>30</sup>

## CATTLE, NOMADS AND THE FORTRESS IN ABU SIDEIR

The presence of nomads involved in cattle herding on a large scale has been proven in the Abu Sideir region thanks to the above considerations. The long gallery of engravings at the *wadi* mouth may indicate that this was a place of key significance for following generations of nomadic herdsman. The wide temporal range during which the rock carvings were made suggests the exit of the *wadi* was a traditional destination for groups

---

<sup>27</sup> The oldest known photograph shows the walls of the fortress were still standing and in good condition at the start of the twentieth century. The photograph is now in The Sudan Archive University of Durham (inv. no. 51-1-67).

<sup>28</sup> EL-AMIN, EDWARDS, *SudNub* 4, 2000, pp. 48–49.

<sup>29</sup> Jebel Nakhara (O.G.S. CRAWFORD, Castles and Churches in the Middle Nile Region, *Sudan Antiquities Services Occasional Papers* 2, Khartoum 1953 [= Castles], p. 18); El-Ar (B. ŻURAWSKI, Facing the Deluge. A Preliminary Report on the Salvage Operations Conducted in the Manatiq of Umm Saffaya, el-Ar, Ashkot and Shemkhiya in 2007–2009, *GAMAR* 7, 2010, pp. 202–203); Umm Marrahi (A.M.A. HAKEM, University of Khartoum Excavations at Sururab and Bauda, North of Omdurman, *Meroitica* 5, 1979, p. 155); Gandeisi (CRAWFORD, Castles, p. 30; M. DRZEWIECKI, Fortresses in the Middle Nile Valley in O.G.S. Crawford times and today, *GAMAR*, in press); Wad Mukhtar, Hosh el-Kab (ID., G. POLKOWSKI, *GAMAR*, in press).

<sup>30</sup> WELSBY, Medieval Kingdoms, p. 85.

of herdsmen.<sup>31</sup> According to the model this may also have been where contact with settled peoples took place. However, here a problem arises. If the fortification was built during the medieval period then no connection exists with cattle herders, who according to the climate conditions of the time could no longer have been functioning in the Abu Sideir region. It seems that for a very long time the *wadi* leading to the Nile valley in the Abu Sideir region was a route which the cattle herders took down to the river in the dry season. As a result of changes in the climate the herders moved south where conditions were better suited to the needs of their animals. This was a very slow process which may have ended at some point in the Meroitic period. What happened to the nomads as the climate changed? Did they also look for other pastures, did they, perhaps, turn to herding a less demanding species, or did they settle in the Nile valley and become farmers?

The Abu Sideir fortifications came about much later, perhaps even several hundred years after cattle herding on a large scale is presumed to have ceased. If this is so, why then were fortifications built here? Nomadic traces dominate in the archaeological material recovered from the site surroundings. However, no traces of settlement which could be attributed to settled farmers have been found. Furthermore, it is worth noting that this section of the Nile valley is not a region of great farming potential. The river in this region is navigable, the current swift and the area of fertile silt deposits relatively small. The nearest hindrance to river transport could have been at El-Usheir Island, where there are ruins of another medieval fortified site.<sup>32</sup> The distance between Abu Sideir and El-Usheir is about 7km. Downriver the Nile narrows at Gandeisi Island, where there is another enclosure.<sup>33</sup> It is about 20km from here to Abu Sideir. A distance of about 30km is considered optimal for two neighbouring fortifications forming a joint defensive system.<sup>34</sup> As the distance between the islands of Gandeisi and El-Usheir is approx. 27km, the fortification at Abu Sideir in this situation seems unnecessary.

The fortress at Abu Sideir has a port section. The lower segment of the fortification was probably once on the river bank, but due to the build-up of silt as well as the damaging effects of flood waters and farming it is currently about 50m away from the Nile. The port section may indicate that various imported materials could have been collected here. The navigable Nile would have made their transport possible. However, where did these goods come from and what indeed were they? Perhaps the nomads, whose presence during medieval times we have ruled out, did in fact come to this part of the Nile valley?

In this context the writings of Ibn Hawqal from the mid tenth century, seem rather interesting.<sup>35</sup> According to his work, the Beja tribe nomads were also cattle herders. They would spend the winter period on the Red Sea coast to later move westwards and could

---

<sup>31</sup> It is believed that art created by herdsmen began to dominate in the Sahara region about 5000 years BC. (ROZWADOWSKI, *Obrazy*, p. 67)

<sup>32</sup> CRAWFORD, *Castles*, pp. 19–24.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

<sup>34</sup> B. ŻURAWSKI, Makurian defensive system in the southern Dongola Reach, *EtudTrav* XIX, 2001, pp. 355–385.

<sup>35</sup> VANTINI, *Oriental Sources*, p. 161.

have reached Nile valley region in the summer (around August). As this is a very general description, it is difficult to define which part of the Nile valley was their final destination.

#### FORTRESSES, CEMETERIES AND ROCK DRAWINGS AT ABU MEREIKH

The sites in Abu Mereikh are of a different nature. The settlements both in the Nile valley and beyond were basically permanent. The majority were small farms with rectangular residential buildings consisting of up to several rooms and circular outbuildings. A small number of ephemeral settlements have been identified and these can be attributed to the nomads. Neither stone circles nor stone stelae have been recorded.

The Abu Mereikh region was heavily exploited by the settlers. There are more cemeteries here than in Abu Sideir. The followers of three (or more) religions were buried in this region. The best example of just how intensively these lands were used and the broad time scale is the extensive cemetery, now intersected by modern buildings, identified by us as sites from AM3 to AM5 (**Fig. 2**). The majority were tumuli graves of varying size and construction, of which part can be dated to the late-/post-Meroitic period. Alongside were well-preserved Christian box graves (site AM6), and further to the north-east a modern Muslim cemetery (AM7). Over hundred box graves were recorded, several dozen modern Muslim graves and over seventy tumuli altogether. The largest of these were mounds measuring over 20m in diameter (max. 28m) and up to 4m in height (**Fig. 9**). We recorded five tumuli of that kind. These graves can be connected to the so-called elite of tumuli graveyards of the late-/post-Meroitic period and are a deeply symbolic element which the people entering the Nile valley via the *wadi* would have recognised. These cemeteries were at the edge of the *wadi* mouth in the Nile valley. Further on there was only the green area where the fortifications were located.

Significant differences were also registered in the rock art. The most obvious being that there are very few scenes showing cattle (only three depictions). There are many herds of camel and riders shown in large and complex scenes. What is the reason for these differences between the AS and AM areas? According to the connection made earlier between breeding and the existing environmental conditions it is possible that the majority of engravings in the Abu Mereikh region were made from the late-Meroitic period up to contemporary times. Does this mean that the nomads in this region did not breed cattle or were religious rituals connected to these animals less developed?

The explanation behind the presence of the complex scenes shown on the rocks can, on one hand, reflect the traditional behaviour of the modern inhabitants of Sudan. On the other, they may be interpreted within the context of the overall political situation in the medieval period in this part of the Nile valley.

The engravings may have shown rituals or actually been a part of them. One such event today is marriage, especially amongst the nomadic tribes of the Bayuda desert (**Fig. 18**). During the marriage ceremony, the closest male relatives and all the invited guests arrive (on foot, by car, camel, donkey, sometimes on horseback) armed. Today, the weapon is most often a stick, occasionally a sword or firearm. In the past there would have been mainly

weapons which were also used in battle. During the ceremony, the crowd of guests salute the couple.<sup>36</sup> Similar scenes may well be shown in the engravings which could indicate that the ceremony took place not far from this point and/or was an important moment in the life of the engraver.

Looking at the Abu Mereikh region from a different perspective it was, as the whole of the Fifth Cataract, a zone where many different aspects came together (the borderlands of Alwa and Makuria; contact between nomadic and settled peoples). Such zones are more frequently subject to aggression than those lying deeper within kingdoms. Demonstrations of strength may be of particular significance in regions like this. This too could be reflected in the rock art. Some engravings show groups on foot and riders, armed, in warrior poses (Figs 19, 20). Perhaps these images are meant to serve as a warning or document events which actually took place. It seems that their aim may have been cautionary, to warn against crossing into the border zone or marked the presence of the engraver. The placement of the rock engravings in the AM landscape may be related to this. The petroglyph sites are clustered near the *wadi* valleys. Groups of rocks which stood out in the landscape were selected on purpose. An excellent example of such a site is AM8 which is located not far from the *wadi* mouth. AM8 consists of two rocks covered in engravings on one side only, so as to be visible to those leaving the Nile valley. The positioning and subject matter of the rock drawings may not be accidental but rather due to social and symbolic-religious conditions. For example, similar-themed scenes to those at AM have been registered in the Comanche Gap mountain range in New Mexico. Armed figures with warrior shields were placed to demarcate the territory; marking tribal boundaries and at the same time warning *outsiders* about the danger of crossing the border.<sup>37</sup> In this context the engravings were a form of spatial marking and may show that relations between the two kingdoms were not always peaceful, which might have been due to a natural conflict of interests but also could have had a religious basis.<sup>38</sup>

## SUMMARY

In the introduction, the question of how deeply the fortifications are connected to the surrounding external context and how far analysis of this can provide answers about the fortifications themselves was raised. Our deliberations are based on the analysis of the fortifications at Abu Sideir, Abu Mereikh B and C in the Fifth Nile Cataract region. Initially, it seems as though these sites share many characteristics: they are located in the same region, not too distant from each other. The location of the fortifications in both cases is on the bank of the Nile not far from large *wadi* valleys, many traces of settlement and examples of rock art have been recorded nearby. In both instances the mouth of the *wadi* at the Nile River appears to be an important factor, holding deeper significance and symbolism for consecutive groups of peoples who either settled here or passed through. These were areas

<sup>36</sup> Piotr Maliński personal comment.

<sup>37</sup> J. CLOTTES, *Word rock art*, Los Angeles 2002, p. 107; ROZWADOWSKI, *Obrazy*, pp. 163–164.

<sup>38</sup> WELSBY, *Medieval Kingdoms*, pp. 32–34.

of increased economic, cultural and military activity and this is where the similarities end, upon closer analysis more significant differences were revealed.

Abu Sideir and Abu Mereikh are located roughly 13km apart in the Nile Fifth Cataract region. Consideration should be given as to whether all the social groups in this region interpreted this distance in the same way. Settled farmers and fishermen who had boats may have had a different concept of this distance compared to the herders for whom a river crossing together with the herd would have involved a search for a ford or narrow point and the risk of losing animals. So whereas contact between nomads and people from the settlements may have been frequent, contact between the nomads from the Eastern desert and those from the Bayuda desert could have been rare. This may well be the cause of the differences registered. A picture emerges from this comparison of permanent and unbroken, (in our interpretation) peaceful activity to the east of the Nile and dynamic, diverse and at times aggressive interaction to the west.

Despite a high level of human activity (tumuli burial mounds, rock art gallery and seasonal herders' settlements), there was no fortress in the AS region during the pre-Christian period. It is clear that before the Christian period contact between nomads and settled peoples did not require particular supervision in AS area. There was a fortress in the AM region, where there was an extensive, elite tumuli cemetery from late-/post-Meroitic period but there is little evidence to support the presence of cattle herders there. The location of the Meroitic fortress in AM should therefore be related more to the political landscape.

There are no straight answers to questions regarding the origin of the construction of the medieval fortresses in AS and AM. In AM it may be linked to developed settlement, signs of which are the Christian cemetery, the rock drawings dominated by images of camels or armed warriors. There is no such context in AS. Assuming that the dates of all the sites we recorded in AS are correct, then the conclusion can be made that despite the lack of definite traces of nomads from the time when the fortifications were in use, it is possible that nomads periodically appeared at the *wadi* mouth at this time. The existence of a fortified site built in such a way may then be explained as protection for the settled peoples and as a way of creating trade opportunities. The explanation, based on knowledge currently available, of the existence of this fortification as one part in the system/chain of fortresses protecting the Nile valley remains unsupported. Nor was this location suitable in terms of farming and furthermore, the Nile at this point is easily navigable.

To summarise, the analysis of the context of the fortifications in Abu Sideir, Abu Mereikh B and C indicated, despite certain similarities, significant differences. It also raised more questions than answers. Perhaps the tested model is too simplified, for it accepts a clear distinction between the farming economy and herding and the settled and nomadic peoples. In both cases such a clear and obvious division does not explain the observations made on site. On one hand it seems that the situation may have been more complex.<sup>39</sup> On the other, part of the nomadic peoples may not have been registered via the analysis of archaeological

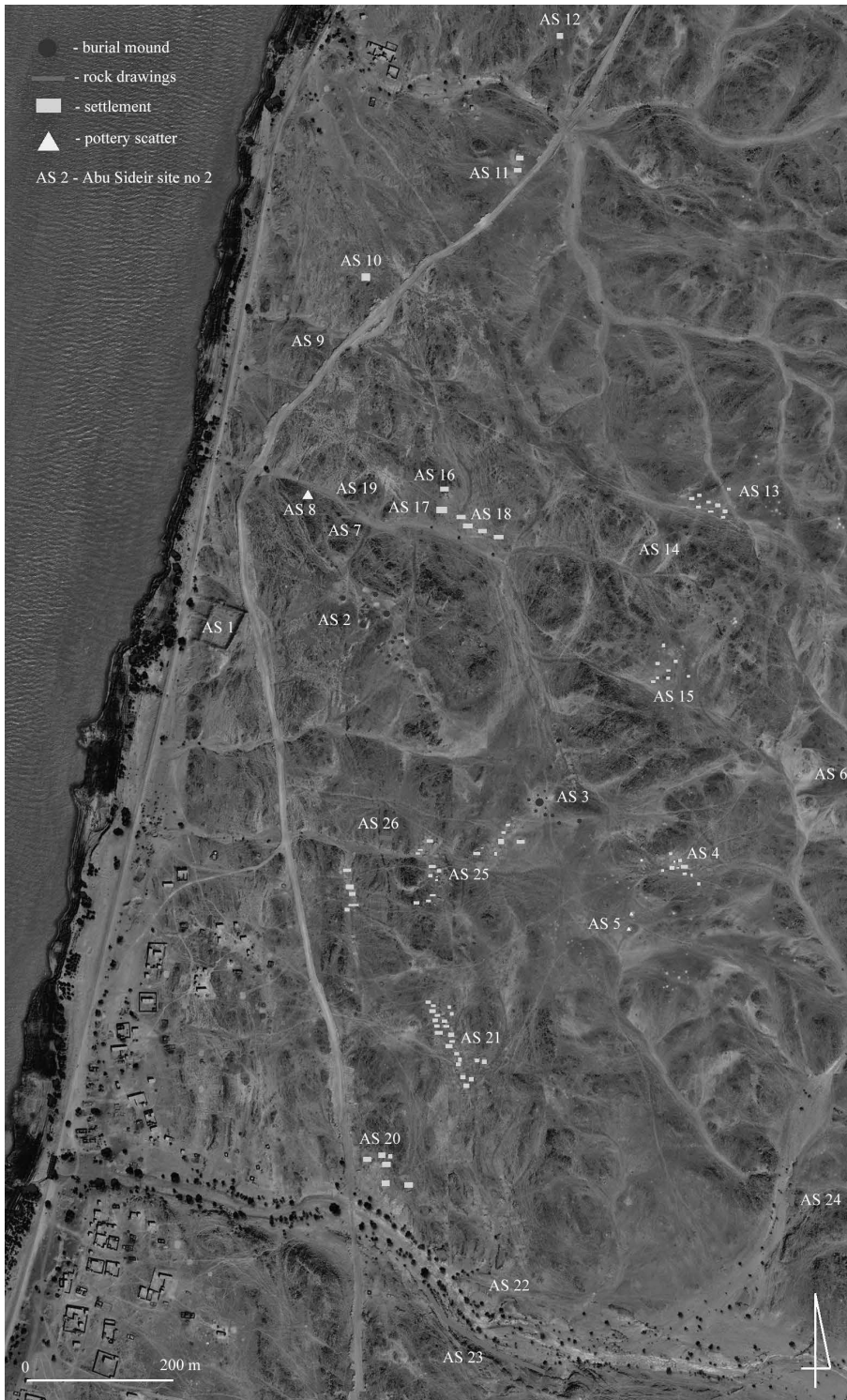
---

<sup>39</sup> B. TRIGGER, *History and settlement in Lower Nubia, Yale University publications in anthropology* 69, New Haven 1965, pp. 21–22.

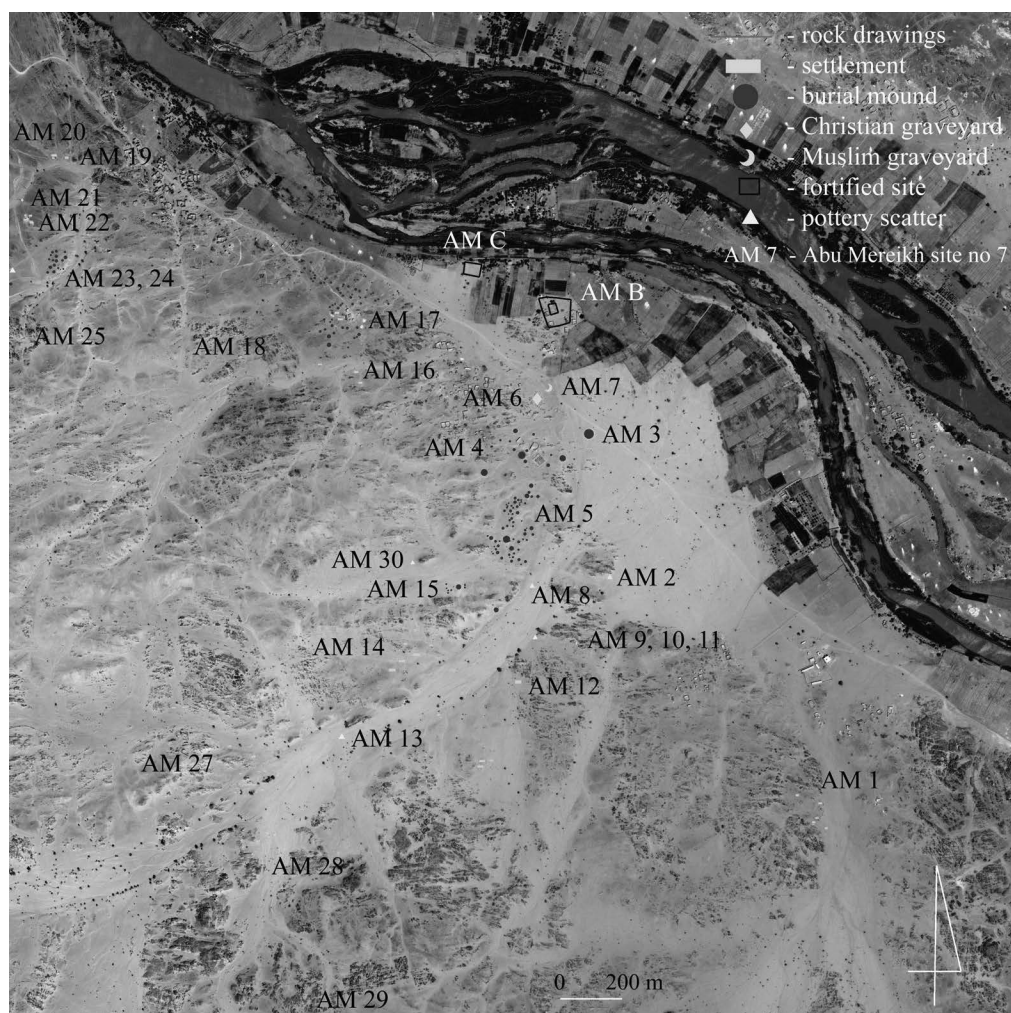
material simply because they did not leave any permanent material traces behind. The analysis of the archaeological context presented above leads to the identification of general factors that influenced the position of the fortresses common to all three fortifications as well as individual factors characteristic for each site in particular. A common element was the micro-region, being in the direct vicinity of the Nile valley and the mouth of a large *wadi*. This type of location is clearly linked to the control of travel routes, and the construction itself, due to its size and the amount of work involved, demanded a well-developed, organised society. Most certainly the presence of the fortifications should be viewed in a wider socio-economic context and here the second set of factors which are individual, characteristic and different for each site, are quite obvious. Some of these we can surmise, for example, on the basis of the archaeological context, some however, on the basis of the method we have accepted, remain unclear.

Mariusz Drzewiecki  
Instytut Prahistorii  
Uniwersytet Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu  
*mario517@wp.pl*

Tomasz Stępnik  
Pracownia Archeologiczna Uni-Art  
*www.pracownia-archeologiczna.com.pl*

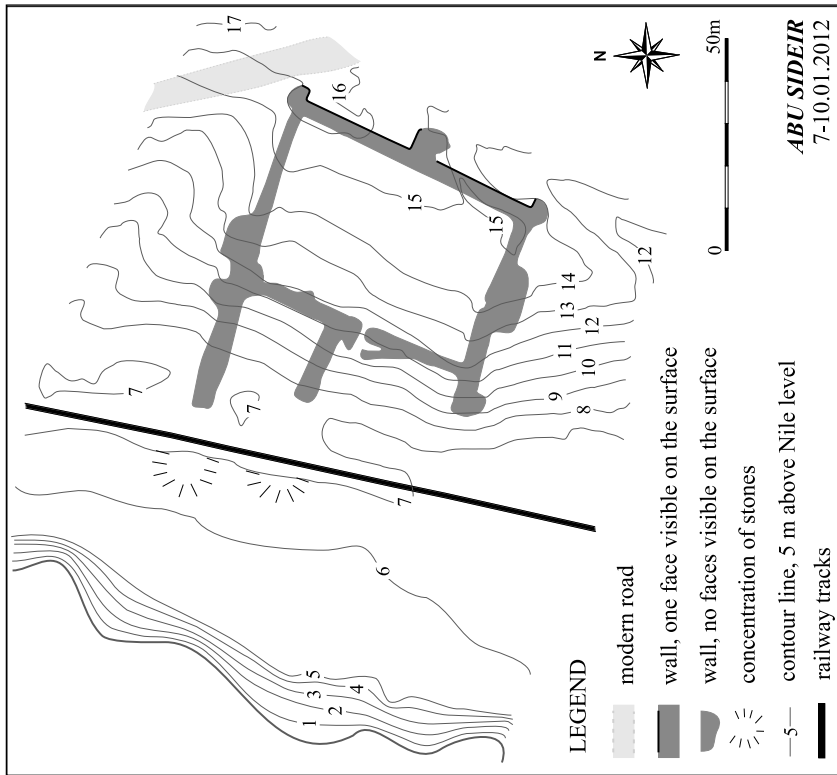


1. Abu Sideir archaeological context after 2012 season survey (processing by M. Drzewiecki, T. Stepnik).

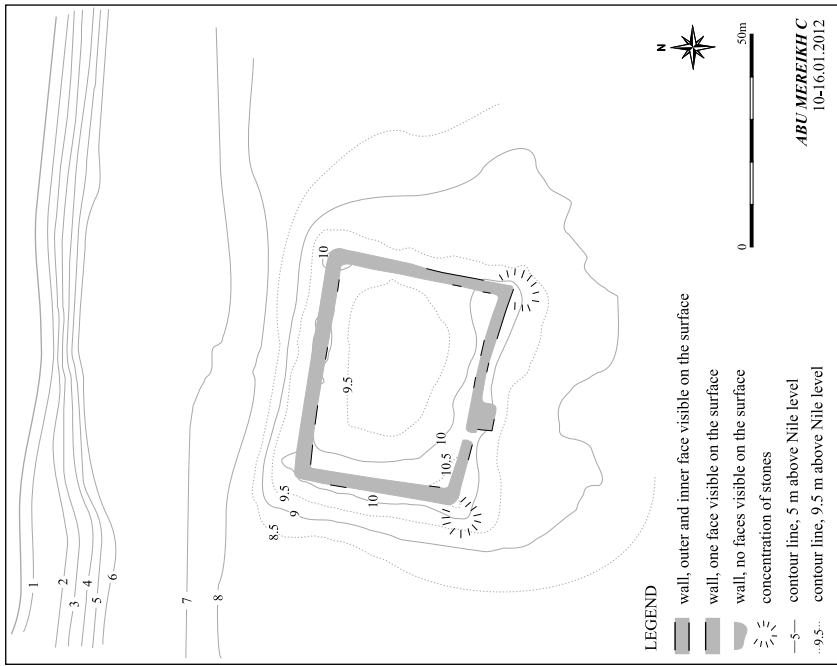


2. Abu Mereikh archaeological context after 2012 season survey (processing by M. Drzewiecki, T. Stępnik).

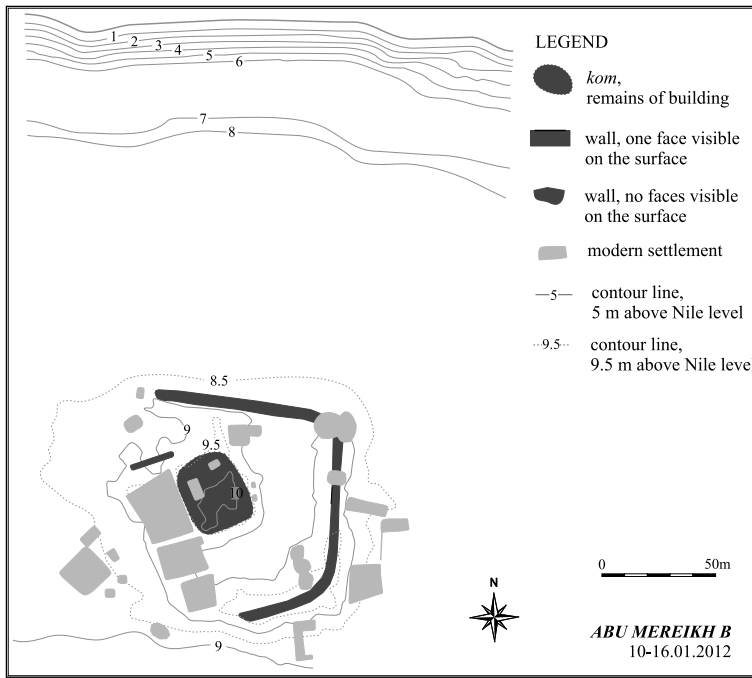




3. Abu Sideir, fortification plan after 2012 season (Drawing: A. Chlebowski, M. Drzewiecki).



4. Abu MEREIKH C, fortification plan after 2012 season (Drawing: A. Chlebowski, M. Drzewiecki).



5. Abu Merekh B, fortification plan after 2012 season (Drawing: A. Chlebowski, M. Drzewiecki).



6. Circular features with stone door jambs on site AS4 (Phot. T. Stępnik).



7. Low walls forming arcs, probably shelters/windbreakers (Phot. T. Stępnik).



8. Oval light and dark stone structure with two stela like stones on site AS4 (Phot. T. Stępnik).



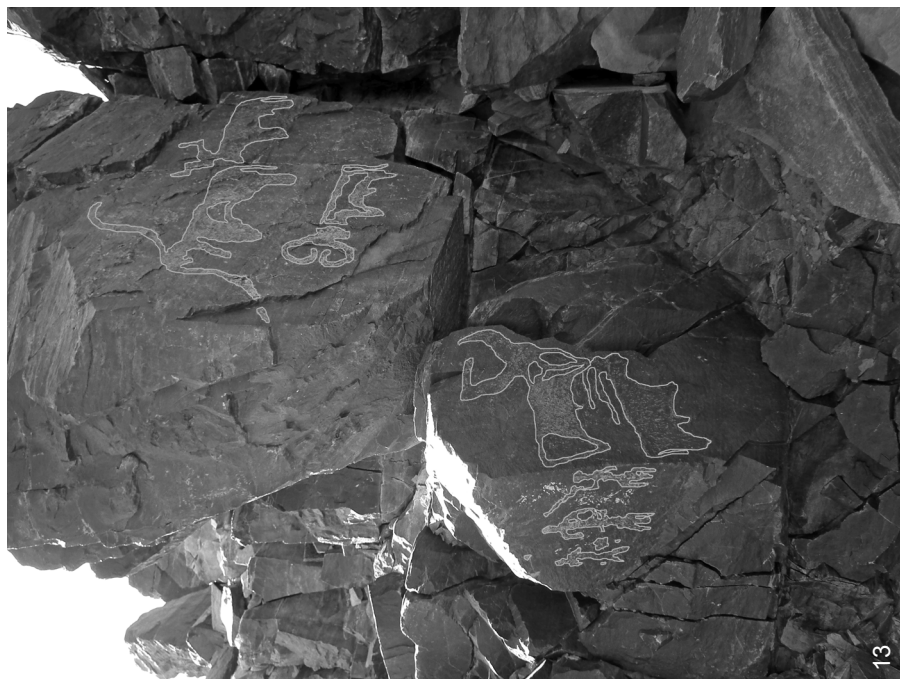
9. Postmeroitic(?) tumulus on site AM5 (Phot. T. Stępnik).



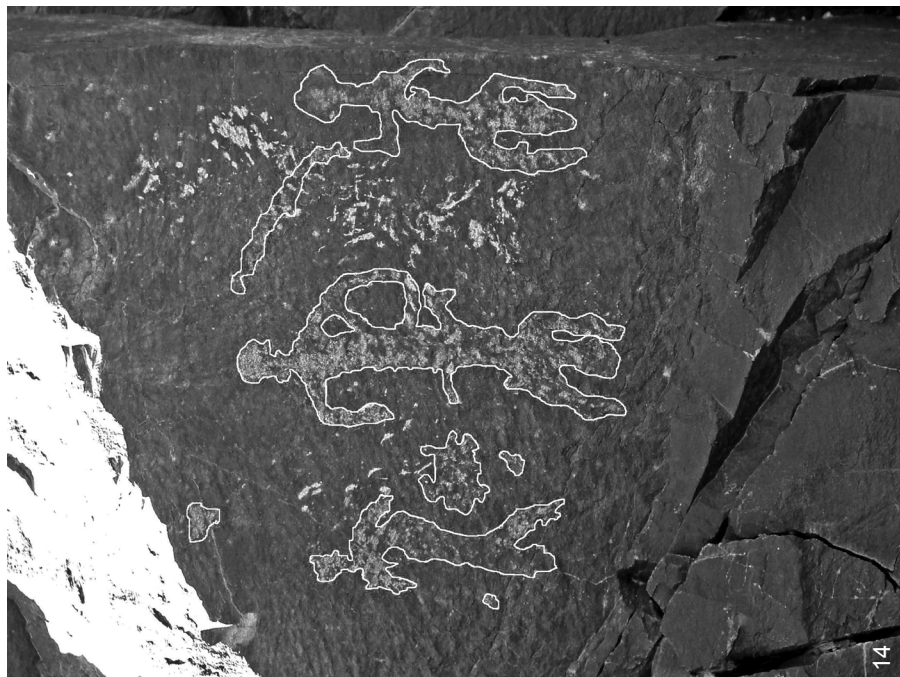
10. Box graves on site AM6 (Phot. T. Stępnik).



11–12. Images of cattle dominate in the AS region (Phot. T. Stepnik). We noticed that attempts had been made to give individual markings, some were shown with horns shaped in a particular way. Such treatment may have been linked to the dualistic view of the world. In the culture of herding peoples the left represents evil, but also the female, illegality, downwards, the west and death. The right side however, was good, it represents masculinity, righteousness, upwards and eastwards, life and paternal relatives. According to Evans-Pritchard, the deformation of the horns of favourite oxen reflected exactly this polarisation. The Nuer people always tried to turn the left horn down and the right up (EVANS-PRITCHARD, *Religia*, pp. 294–295).



13



14

13–14. In the AS region anthropomorphs were rarely portrayed, therefore the engraving showing three figures amongst cattle is even more intriguing (Phot. T. Stępnik). It might be that these figures represented the *kurar twac*, known from the Nuer, a so-called priest in leopard skins. The shape hanging between their legs may well represent a leopard's tail. These men were identified in Nuer society by the leopard skins they wore on their shoulders. They performed traditional ritual functions, mainly connected with sacrifice and were also connected with tribal law, including swearing oaths (EVANS-PRITCHARD, *Religia*, pp. 345–368).

15–16. In both the AS and AM regions studied, images of wild animals were relatively rare. In AS there are some giraffes and crocodiles, in AM ostriches and antelope (Phot. T. Stepnik). This may be due to the fact that hunting did not play a great role in the lives of the herders. The herders considered hunting to be for the poor who did not have enough cattle to eat their meat and it was a sign that the hunter lacked good herding skills (M. OLSZEWSKI, Wprowadzenie, [in:] EVANS-PRITCHARD, *Religia*, p. 21). Ostriches were most often hunted for their feathers (EVANS-PRITCHARD, *Religia*, p. 232).



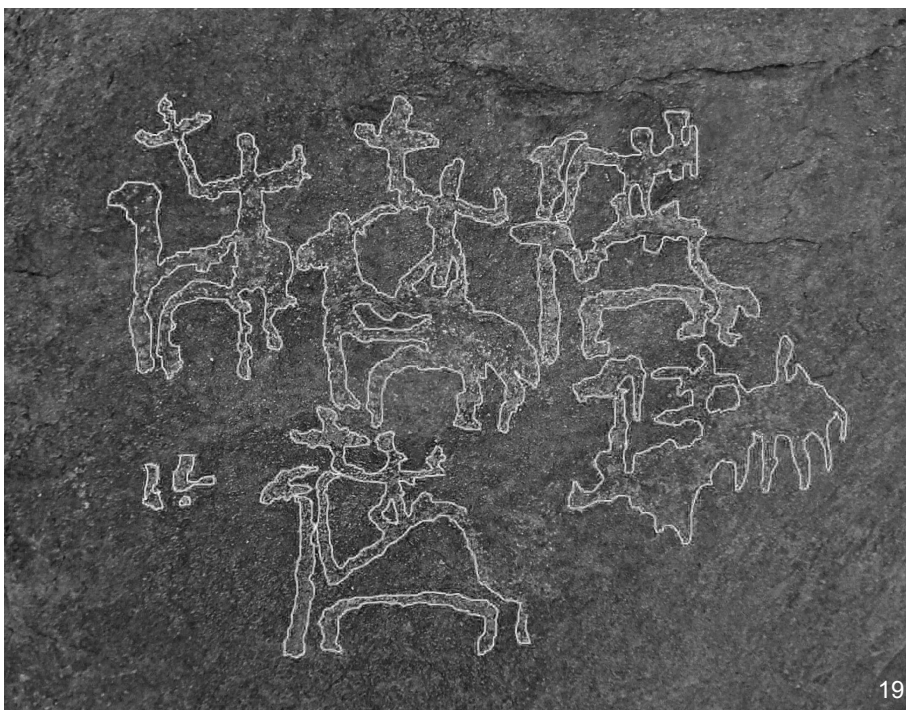


17. A number of petroglyphs are extremely difficult to date. Some engravings from different periods are superimposed. In one example, a man is shown holding a cow by the tail in one hand, and a lasso in the other. Next to him, in a different technique, is a rider on a horse, and below that the Arabic phrase *Al-taiba* partially overlaps one of the cows (Phot. T. Stępnik).



18. It sometimes seems that the only difference in the lives of contemporary nomadic groups in the still-troubled borderlands of Sudan is in the weaponry – bows and swords have been replaced by Kalashnikov rifles. Weaponry display during a wedding, Souni al-Songor, Northern Kordofan, February 2011 (Phot. L. Banaszek).





19–20. Abu Mereikh rock drawings were dominated by group scenes in which there were several anthropomorphs, on foot, riders – mainly on camel – often in warrior poses holding weapons (Phot. T. Stepanik).