

# Archaeological survey in Miseeda, Sudan (season 2022–2023)



**Abstract:** The general aim of the archaeological survey in Miseeda was to understand the archaeological context of the church at site MAS021. The survey is part of a larger project entitled “The Good Shepherd of Miseeda. An image in the context of the changing cultural landscape of the Third Cataract of the Nile” directed by Dobrochna Zielińska (Faculty of Archaeology, University of Warsaw). A total of 294 archaeological sites covering the periods from prehistory to the modern times have been recorded (13 verified sites and 281 previously unknown sites).

**Keywords:** Survey, Nubia, Sudan

## INTRODUCTION

The general aim of the archaeological survey in Miseeda was to understand the archaeological context of the church at site MAS021. The church in Miseeda is located at a distance of approximately 1 km from the Nile Valley, on a granitic rock outcrop across Wadi Farja. Based on the results of previous surveys in the area, the church appeared to be an isolated, single building removed from other known medieval settlements (Osman and Edwards 2011: 325–326). It was constructed against a boulder with

**Mariusz Drzewiecki<sup>1</sup>**  
**Paweł Polkowski<sup>2</sup>**  
**Joanna Ciesielska<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> University of Warsaw

<sup>2</sup> Poznań Archaeological Museum

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The archaeological survey was conducted from 20 to 30 November 2022 and continued from 19 January to 2 February 2023. The survey team comprised (in alphabetical order): Joanna Ciesielska, Mariusz Drzewiecki, Karel Innemée, Hanna Kurcz, Paweł Polkowski, Katarzyna Rosa, and Dobrochna Zielińska.



Fig. 1. General view of the church in Miseeda (site MAS021). The arrow points to the location of the boulder with the rock drawing (Photo M. Drzewiecki)

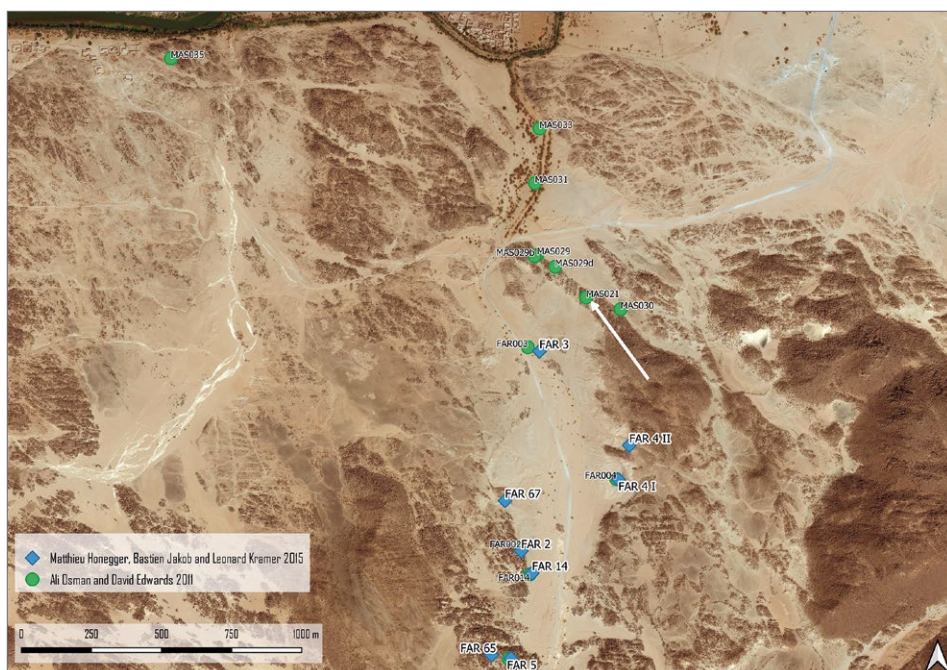


Fig. 2. Miseeda, archaeological sites recorded during previous archaeological projects. The white arrow indicates the location of the church (Processing M. Drzewiecki; background image Pleiades 2020)

a petroglyph depicting a 2.5 m high male figure and two goats, executed at an earlier date [Fig. 1]. The focus of the project is determining the reason behind this particular location of the church. The archaeological survey of the surroundings aims at providing insights into local settlement patterns, identifying other sites of the same date, and studying the intentions behind local rock art images.

Before the launch of our project, Miseeda was included in the large archaeological survey projects that covered the entire Mahas region (Osman and Edwards 2011) and the main section of the Wadi Farja (Honegger, Jakob, and Kramer 2015). Due to their regional and fairly general character, these projects were characterized by low-intensity fieldwalking focused mostly on the Nile Valley and the Wadi Farja. As a result, only major sites and sites along the main routes have been identified [Fig. 2].

Since we aimed to cover a much smaller area, our methodology consisted of a detailed fieldwalking survey in order to document the extent of the known sites and identify other, previously unrecorded remains from all periods. Handheld Garmin GNSS devices were used to record waypoints and tracks [Fig. 3]. Each identified/verified site was pinpointed (coordinate system WGS84) and photographed. Photographic documentation was made with handheld digital cameras (various types). Selected sites and the general landscape of the surveyed area were additionally documented with aerial photography (drone Mavic Air 2 with Hasselblad camera). So far, we have covered an area within a radius of about 1 km from the church, encompassing a section of the Nile Valley, Wadi Farja and the surrounding deserts and hills [see Fig. 3].

Altogether, 294 archaeological sites have been recorded (13 verified and 281 previously unknown sites). An archaeological site is here understood as an area with moveable and/or immovable archaeological objects scattered on the surface. Usually, the sites featured pottery and/or lithic scatters. However, a single find (a potsherd or a stone tool) was considered an insufficient site indicator. A different situation was with immovable objects, which were always recorded. Stone structures, when present, were pinpointed as individual objects and marked with consecutive letters (A, B, etc., for example MAS105A, MAS105B, etc.). They were usually associated with other moveable artefacts. On rare occasions, a stone structure was the only object recorded on a site. In such situations, the closest surroundings of the object constituted a site, and the stone structure was marked with a letter. A similar approach was applied to rock art. These types of finds, recorded in only a few locations, were registered as panels (Panel 1, Panel 2, etc., for example MAS105 Panel 1, MAS105 Panel 2, etc.). Due to the small number of rock art finds, there was no need for a more complex registration system, similar to, for example, the one used by the Scandinavian Joint Expedition (Hellström and Langballe 1970).

The survey area is currently a harsh environment where rare but intensive rainwater flows can have a significant impact on the post-depositional movement of small finds. This is clearly visible in the beds of the seasonal streams, where the archaeological sites tend to have elongated shapes covering longer parts of the wadis. The extent of each site, based on the distribution of surface finds, is presented in Fig. 4.

### STONE STRUCTURES

Most of the sites were found in either of two types of locales: in the dried-out waterways of the interior with areas cleared of debris or on top of a hill, in between the boulders providing shelter from the elements. Some sites appear to have been delimited by low boundary walls running between and over the rocky outcrops. Similar structures were recorded all over Sudan (for example Welsby 2005; Suková and Cílek 2012). The tops of the hills are also dotted with various types of structures of unidentified functions. Accumulations of stones of various shapes and sizes (from small piles of no more than a dozen stones to a large oval 2–3 m in diameter) were recorded on top of the

rock outcrops and very large flat-topped boulders. Some of those structures take on the appearance of circular or oval rings consisting of a single row of stones, others resemble funerary cairns, but with no chamber underneath. Circular-walled features with stones arranged radially in several courses were also identified.

A number of simple linear features running across valleys could have been used as elementary water management installations. Deliberate entrapment or slowdown of water flow would have permitted drainage of excess water and prevention of flash flood destruction during the rainy season and its judicious distribution during the dry months. Various other stone features were recorded, either free-standing or

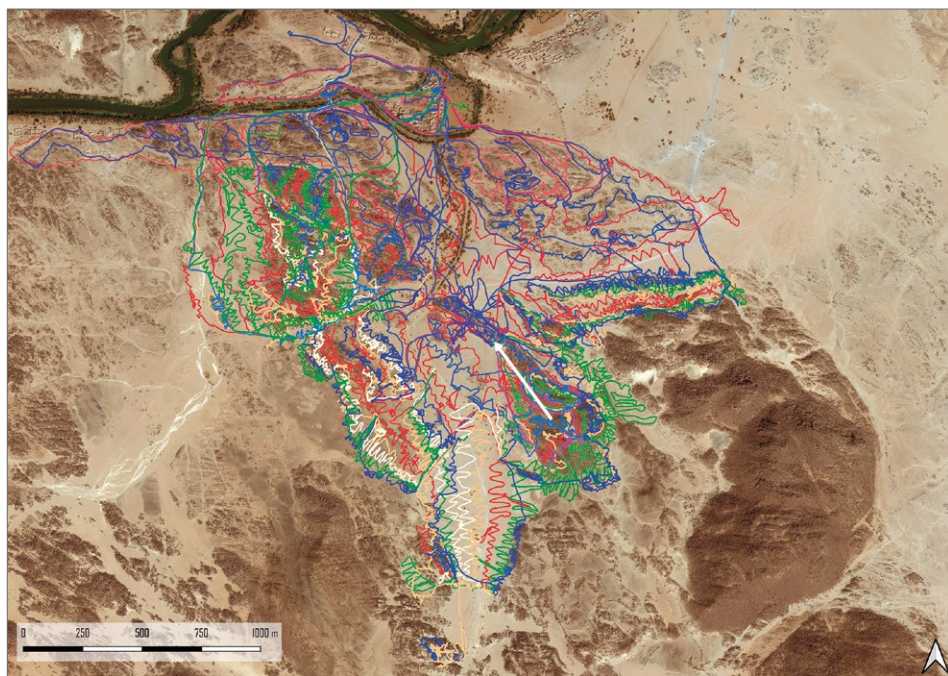


Fig. 3. Area covered by the archaeological survey. Each line represents a track of a surveyor: green Joanna Ciesielska, red Mariusz Drzewiecki, blue Paweł Polkowski, yellow Karel Innemée, purple Katarzyna Rosa, and white Dobrochna Zielińska. The white arrow indicates the location of the church (Processing M. Drzewiecki; background image Pleiades 2020)

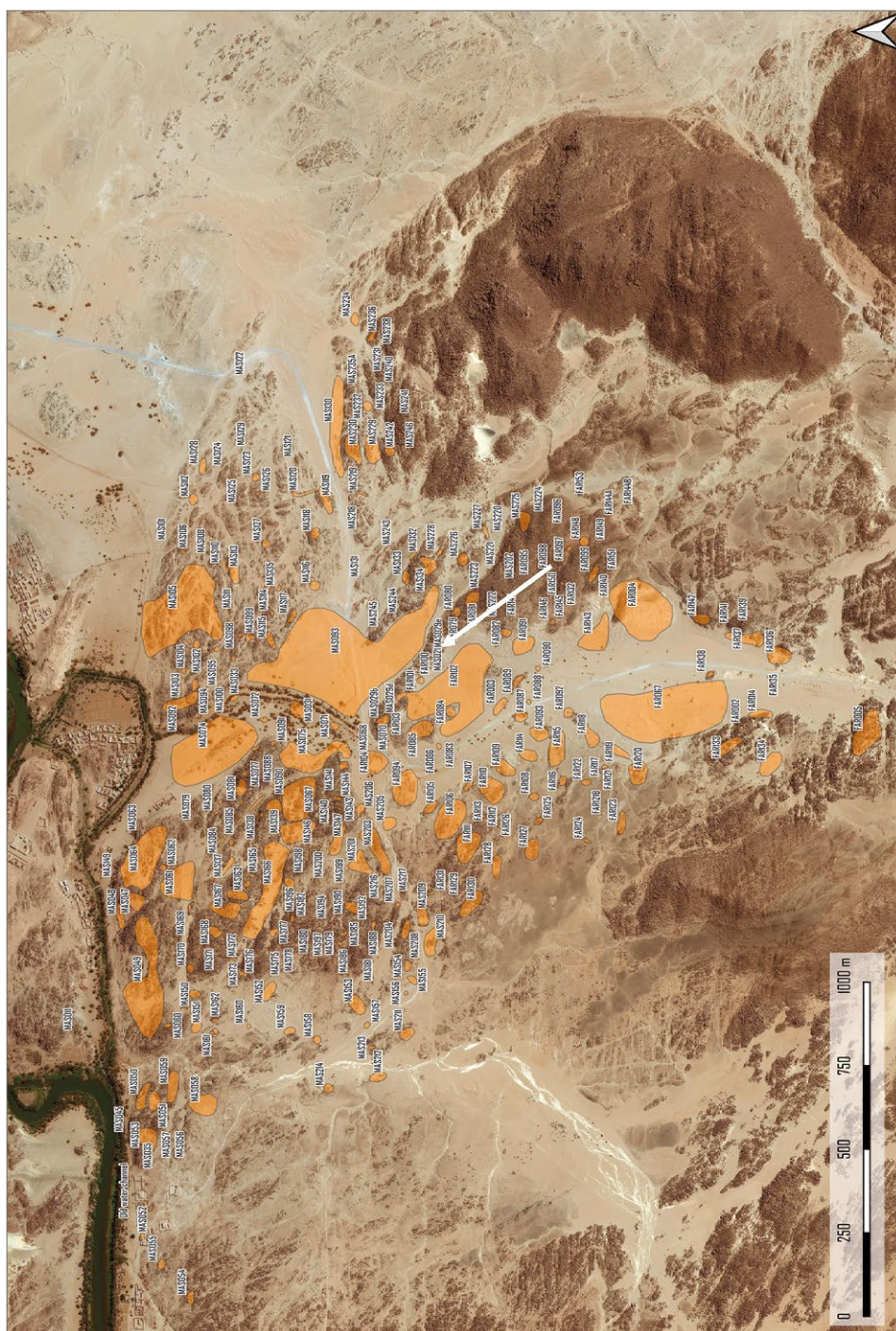


Fig. 4. Archaeological sites recorded during the season 2022–2023. The white arrow indicates the location of the church (Processing M. Drzewiecki; background image Pleiades 2020)

clustered together and usually associated with other finds. Whenever possible, identified features were classified according to the system introduced by Borowski and Welsby (2012) for the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project. The most abundant among them were the remnants of temporary occupation, such as circular or sub-rectangular huts/shelters, either free-standing or abutting outcrops of bed-rock or large boulders, usually preserved in the form of a single-course outline. Such structures were usually placed at the foot of hills or between large boulders on the beds of wadis running between mountain ranges. They are often accompanied by other installations, such as small circular rings of a single row of stones (campfires?), linear stone arrangements closing up an empty space between boulders (stock enclosures?), windbreaks, and animal pens. Another form of human occupation can be found in the upper sections of the hills, where natural rock shelters formed of mas-

sive boulders were used, occasionally supplemented by low stone walls filling up empty spaces between the rocks. Circular wells with walls rising a few courses over the modern walking level constitute a rare type of find, identified only at a few sites, mostly in the bed of the Wadi Farja (for example FAR003).

Only a few presumed cemeteries or free-standing graves have been identified. A series of small gravel mounds covered with stones were identified in a *khôr* between two hills with extensive settlement sites on their flat tops. The cemetery, tentatively dated to the Kerman period based on the associated pottery finds, was clearly divided into four sections (MASo84–086 and MASo88) by low linear arrangements of stones running across the small valley. A number of isolated, possibly funerary features in the form of oval cairns were also recorded in other parts of the concession. However, without further in-depth investigation their identification remains uncertain.



Fig. 5. Selection of pottery fragments decorated with zoomorphic representations from site MAS110, probably dated to about the 5th/6th century CE (Photos D. Zielińska)

## SMALL FINDS

The majority of the recorded artifact collection consisted of pottery and lithics, often occurring as large surface concentrations [Fig. 5]. However, isolated metal objects, organic materials (such as shells and burnt fragments of bones) and beads were registered as well. A unique find at site MAS066 consisted of a fragment of what seems to be a pottery figurine, strongly resembling the Late Neolithic anthropomorphic figurines known from Kadruka and Kadada (for example Chłodnicki, Bagińska, and Polkowski 2015: 64–65). The surviving piece is approximately 3.5 cm high, preserving what seems to be the torso and part of the lower body [Fig. 6]. The latter is covered with several rows of parallel lines incised before firing. Should this identification be correct, then the small hole in the front side near the lower end of the figurine might indicate the navel.

Samples of all small finds have been collected for further studies. However, already at this point it can be stated that prehistoric, Kerman, medieval, post-medieval, and modern materials were identified. Prehistoric sites are numerous, encompassing a long time span from the

Paleolithic to the Late Neolithic period. Remains attributed to the pre-Kerman and Kerman periods were encountered most frequently. Some of the largest sites, in turn, can be dated to medieval times, and one such previously unknown locality, MAS105, is described below as an example.

## SITE MAS105 (COORDINATES: 2260001.5/3383459.1)

Among the most notable sites recorded was the locale labeled MAS105. The site is located about 400 m to the southeast of the modern Miseeda village [see Fig. 4], on a large plateau among granite outcrops breaking through the sand overlay forming a massif restricted by larger wadis [Fig. 7]. MAS105 is composed of at least 18 stone features distributed over an area of approximately 4 ha [Fig. 8], covered with large amounts of pottery sherds datable to the medieval period. Several features merit special attention.

**Feature A** is composed of two stone rings, each about 2 m in outer diameter, joined together to form an 8-shaped structure [see Figs 8 and 9]. Each ring separately is reminiscent of free-standing circular structures recorded during the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project (Borowski and Welsby 2012: types CS05–07), but no similar combined features were identified by these authors.

**Feature B** resembled **Feature A** in outline (both are visible in the bottom-central part of Fig. 7), though it was significantly larger and constructed of somewhat larger stone blocks. In addition, faint semi-circular stone arrangements can be traced between the two stone rings, potentially delineating internal divisions of space within the structure. Three rows of small



Fig. 6. Fragment of an anthropomorphic figurine from site MAS066 (Photos D. Zielińska)



Fig. 7. Site MAS105, aerial view. Stone features A and B are visible at the bottom and center of the picture (Photo M. Drzewiecki)



Fig. 8. Site MAS105. Stone features are marked with letters A–Q; panels with rock art as P1 and P2 (Processing M. Drzewiecki; background image Pleiades 2020)

stones, often set some distance apart, were used to delineate a rectangular space abutting a rocky outcrop at the center of the plateau, forming **Feature D** (reminiscent of Borcowski and Welsby's type RFo2a). **Feature F** is representative of a wide class of features recorded during the present survey, a large curvilinear enclosure built up against a rock outcrop (similar to SBo6 by Borcowski and Welsby 2012). A number of features were also recorded in adjacent *khors* and on top of the rocky outcrops, among them very small free-standing circular structures (such as **Features J** and **O**, similar to Borcowski and Welsby's type SSo1) and much larger circular-walled features or cairns (**Features L** and **M**, see Borcowski and Welsby's types FMo3, CSO6, or SSo4).

As previously mentioned, the entire area was covered with large amounts of pottery sherds.<sup>1</sup> In addition, many of the features yielded ceramics associated with them and were thus recorded separately. The main component of the assemblage appears to be superior-quality tableware (mostly medium-sized bowls) made out of fine red clay with tiny particles of non-organic additives. It was often covered with red, orange, or cream slip and painted with darker motifs. Fragments of utility ware, including storage vessels, large bowls, *qawadis*, *dokat*, and jars of a coarser Nile clay, some decorated with incised geometric motifs, were also identified. Most of the assemblage can be dated to the period between the 8th and 10th–12th centuries CE. Structures like **Features**

**A** and **B** can possibly be interpreted as occupational in nature, in tandem with other installations and ceramic evidence marking the presence of a large habitation site. As observed by Suková and Cílek (2012), in the Jebel Sabaloka area major Christian settlements were often located at the entrance to a gorge to provide protection among the towering hills and extend control over the nearby routes. A similar scenario can be envisaged for MAS105 and some other Christian sites in the survey area.

In close proximity to the potential habitation zone, at the northern edge of the hilltop plateau, two adjacent rock art panels were located. The panels occupy vertical rock surfaces overlooking the lower ground (currently farmland). The most prominent archaeological feature, the fortified site MAS020, is clearly visible from the spot. However, the petroglyphs found in this locality seem to considerably predate the medieval remains described above. **Panel 1** contains three zoomorphic figures: two depictions of cattle and a giraffe [Fig. 10]. All petroglyphs seem to have been executed by the same hand, as they share a number of common traits. The figures were first outlined by pecking; the lines consist of closely spaced and relatively deep peckmarks, and hence the outlines are more clearly visible compared to the filling of the images, which also consists of peckmarks, but more widely distributed. All the animals are rendered in a peculiar manner that is usually considered typical for the Kerman horizon petroglyphic

1 The pottery material is being studied by Katarzyna Rosa, Faculty of Archaeology, University of Warsaw.

iconography (see Kleinitz 2012). The cattle have straight backs, long horns and specifically rendered heads/muzzles. The horns are characteristically incurved, referring to artificial horn deformation, another typical feature of Kerman/C-Group cattle petroglyphs. Both bovids have what seems to be a pendant hanging from the neck, which most probably is another deformed body feature, namely the dewlap. Although all figures are likely



Fig. 9. Site MAS105, Feature A  
(Photo J. Ciesielska)

contemporaneous, there is an indication of the order of their execution. Apparently, the giraffe, and possibly also the cattle image placed lower on the panel, were created before the second depiction of the bovid. The hind leg and the tail of the latter are clearly superimposed on the giraffe's neck/head. The association of cattle and giraffe motifs is another element pointing to the "Early Cattle", most likely Kerman, identification of the petroglyphs. It is known from various areas in Sudan, including the Third and Fourth Cataract regions (cf. Kleinitz 2012: 39, Fig. 11). **Panel 2**, located opposite **Panel 1**, contains most probably more depictions of giraffes, but their state of preservation is very poor.

#### PETROGLYPHS AND ROCK GONGS

The petroglyphs described above are by no means a unique feature in the survey area, and altogether 24 rock art localities and one rock gong site have been found

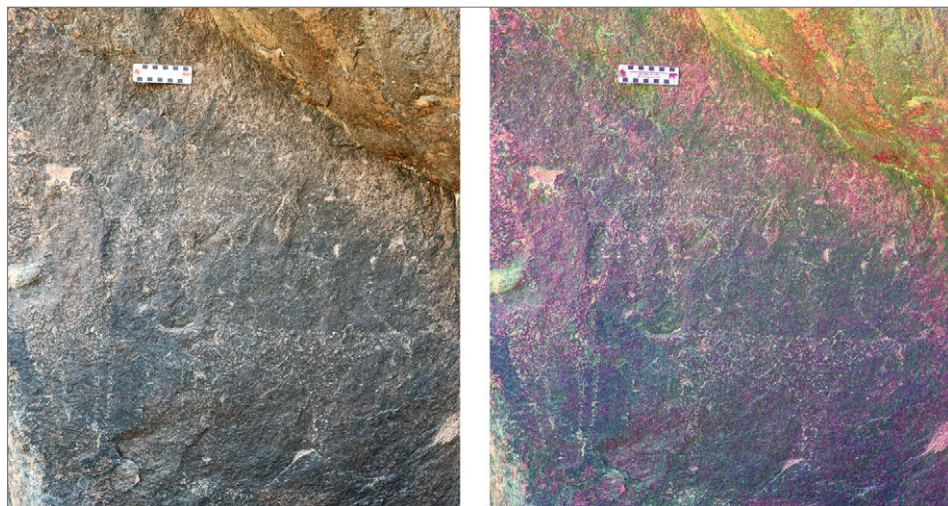


Fig. 10. Site MAS105, Panel 1 showing two depictions of cattle and a giraffe; image taken in natural light (left) and enhanced using dStretch software, YDT color space (right) (Photo and processing P. Polkowski)

to date. A large part of the petroglyphs can be tentatively dated to the Kerman and Christian periods. It should be noted that the vast majority of images are very shallowly pecked or scratched into granitic surfaces, causing considerable difficulties in the documentation process. Most of them become relatively clearly visible only at particular times of day, and many remain poorly visible regardless of the circumstances.

One of the aims of the survey was to verify if monumental petroglyphs similar to the ones in the vicinity of the church (lion, “warrior-king”, elephant, see Osman and Edwards 2011: 328–329) occur also in other areas. So far, no depictions of a similar size and style have been recorded elsewhere. However, several sites feature petroglyphs that may have been inspired by the monumental images. They show stylized versions of the “warrior-king” (e.g., MASo11), as well as a smaller and differently rendered lion (FARo02).

In the context of the church, petroglyphs from the Christian period are

of particular importance. Two sites in Wadi Farja seem to be especially significant. Both contain crosses pecked onto vertical rock surfaces and both are well visible from the level of the wadi bed. FARo14 is located to the south of the church and consists of four panels with crosses, while FAR103 is a large isolated boulder to the north of MASo21, with its northern side covered with Christian symbols. Both these localities seem to be directly related to the church, perhaps meant to indicate its presence to the passers-by traveling along Wadi Farja.

So far, only one rock gong site (MASo56) was discovered within the limits of the survey area. It consists of two stones, a slightly concave smaller one and a large oval boulder [Fig. 11]. Both have cup marks indicating repeated pounding, although it is the former that displays typical traits of a lithophone (cf. Kleinitz, Till, and Baker 2015), being a low-lying slab-like stone with a percussion zone situated at one of its edges [see Fig. 11]. Cup marks on the larger boulder are, in turn, distributed more

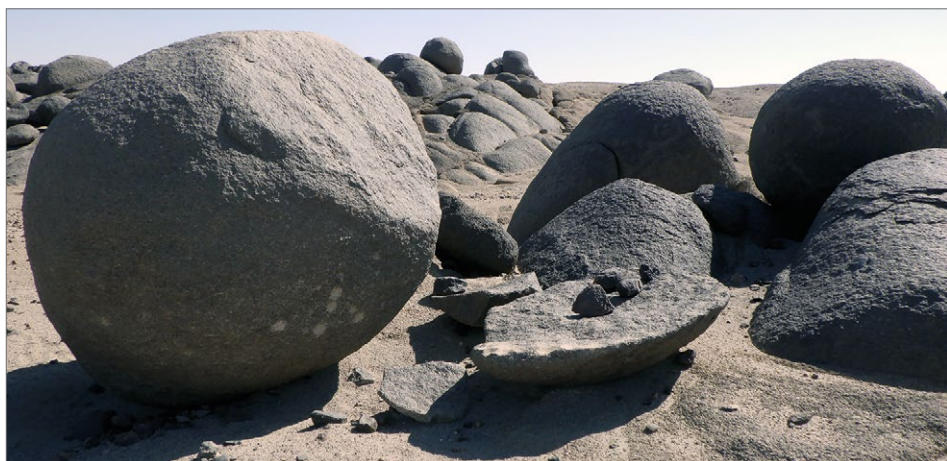


Fig. 11. Site MAS056, two rock gongs (Photo P. Polkowski)

widely and seem to be not patinated, which may indicate that this “gong” was

used much more recently. No associated archaeological material was registered.

## CONCLUSIONS

Previous archaeological surveys in the area proved the Mahas region and Wadi Farja to be rich in archaeological remains from various periods. The results of our fieldwork, employing a systematic high-intensity fieldwalking approach, provided an extensive amount of data to support this observation. Currently, it can be stated that the entire survey area is an archaeological landscape in which concentrations of surface finds are indicated by archaeological sites. The land was intensively used by past communities of various sizes throughout most periods of human history.

A question arises whether the most visited/traversed area in the region was the mouth of the Wadi Farja. It would explain the large number of archaeological remains in that area. Alternatively, the distribution might reflect the state of research and, with more systematic survey projects elsewhere, the entire Mahas region will turn out to be similarly rich in material remains of the past.

The survey encompassed merely a part of the local landscape and did not include the major medieval cent-

ers. Although Miseeda is thought to have been peripheral, the first season of fieldwork has shown that the church (site MASo21) was not isolated but surrounded by many, sometimes large, settlement sites generally dated to the medieval period. Based on the quantity of small finds one can infer that some of the sites were settlements inhabited for a considerably long time. Similar pottery sherds found in the church and at nearby sites may indicate that several places in the area were used in the same period as the church. However, more detailed studies of the small finds and the chronology of the sites will be conducted in the subsequent phases of the project.

The church is not the only medieval site where older petroglyphs have been recorded. Site MAS105, described above, is only an example. In-depth studies of relations between older sites with petroglyphs reclaimed by younger occupational sites may provide insights on the ways past communities perceived, used or reinvented older concepts represented in rock art.

### Dr. Mariusz Drzewiecki

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1290-9425>

University of Warsaw

Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology

m.drzewiecki2@uw.edu.pl

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**Dr. Paweł Polkowski**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5364-6214>

Poznań Archaeological Museum

Rock Art Unit

pawel.polkowski@muzarp.poznan.pl

**Dr. Joanna Ciesielska**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8087-3079>

University of Warsaw

Faculty of Oriental Studies & Institute for Advanced Studies; Faculty of Physics

joanna.ciesielska@uw.edu.pl

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