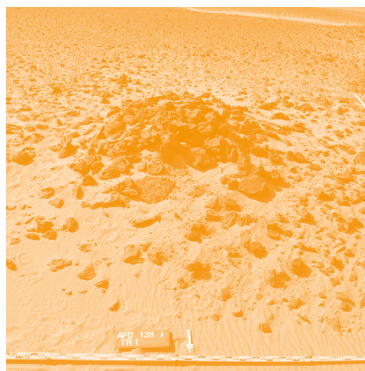


Unearthing 6th-century CE occupation on the fringes of the Nile Valley

Closing the PalaeoAffad Project in the Affad Basin (Sudan)



Abstract: Archaeological sites located on the fringes of the current Nile river valley, 7 km inland, in the Affad Basin (Northern Province, Sudan), explored by the PalaeoAffad Project in the final season of fieldwork under the current grant project, revealed cultural affinities with pastoralism in a semi-desert environment dated to the period between the Meroitic and Makurian kingdoms. Excavated structures included possible drinkers for animals and an infant's grave found under a stone tumulus.

Keywords: survey, Nubia, Middle Nile Valley

The PalaeoAffad Project, which started fieldwork in the Affad Basin on the Middle Nile in Sudan [Fig. 1] roughly a decade ago, implementing research under two successive grants from the National Science Center in Poland, has now run to its end. The 2022 field season, following a two-year break due to the pandemic, closes research in the field. Moreover, the termination of archaeological research in this microregion is related to extensive state investment in industrial agriculture, which has irretrievably destroyed any extant archaeological remains. Industrial farms have covered the entire terrace area available for cultivation and there is reason to believe

Marta Osypińska¹
Justyna Kokolus²
Paweł Wiktorowicz³
Marzena Cendrowska⁴
Roman Łopaciuk⁵
Marek Chłodnicki⁶
Beata Piotrowska⁷
Jakub Sobko⁸
Huyam Khalid Madani⁹

¹ Institute of Archaeology, University of Wrocław

³ Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences

⁵ Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures, Polish Academy of Sciences

⁶ Archaeological Museum in Poznań

⁹ National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums

^{2,4,7,8} Independent researcher

Team

Days of work: February–March 2022

Principal Investigator: Marta Osypińska (Institute of Archaeology, University of Wrocław)

NCAM Inspector: Houyam Khalid

Team members: Przemysław Bobrowski (Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences), Justyna Kokolus, Piotr Osypiński (Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences), Marek Chłodziński (Archaeological Museum in Poznań), Paweł Wiktorowicz (Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences), Roman Łopaciuk (Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures, Polish Academy of Sciences), Marzena Cendrowska, Beata Piotrowska, Jakub Sobko (independent researchers)

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that investment will extend beyond it into the desert. The only “positive” element, albeit non-archaeological, is the return of herds of cattle to Affad after almost five millennia (Osypińska et al. 2021). The enormous fields have turned out to be a great place to graze animals, while the huge canals provide enough water for both plants and animals.

The main goal of the PalaeoAffad Project was interdisciplinary research on the adaptation strategies of human communities inhabiting the Middle Nile Valley in the Pleistocene and early Holocene and, in the opinion of the principal researchers, exhaustive studies of related issues have been concluded (see Osypińska et al. 2016, Osypińska et al. 2019). In 2022,

in view of the progressing agricultural investment in the region, which had taken place during the two years since the previous field season, it was assumed that undertaking further research at Pleistocene sites located on the former river terraces would not be feasible. Thus, the team ventured to explore several sites of indeterminate chronology, presumed to be of a funerary nature, situated at the edge of the Mesozoic sandstone plateau enclosing the Affad Basin from the north and recorded earlier by the SDRS survey (Żurawski 2003) and the PalaeoAffad Project over the past ten years. The results of a survey made upriver in the Fourth Cataract region suggested a temporal horizon for these sites in the latest pre-

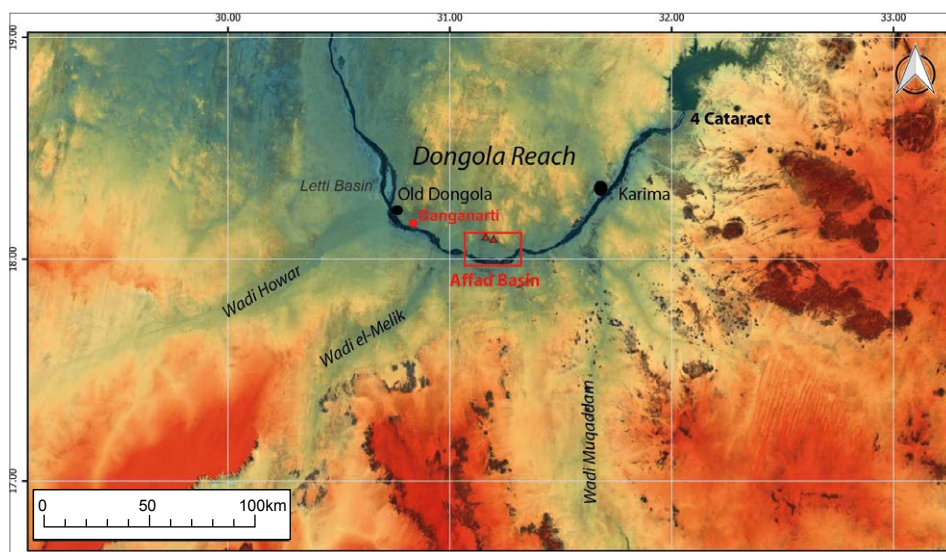


Fig. 1. Southern Dongola Reach and location of the Affad Basin and the Banganarti Archaeological Station; currently explored sites marked with red triangles (PalaeoAffad Project | measurements and mapping P. Wiktorowicz)

- 1 Ten-years' worth of finds from the PalaeoAffad Project are now in storage at the Banganarti Archaeological Station (BAS), established by Bogdan T. Żurawski from the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. The BAS facility offers office and field lab space conducive to further studies of this collection.

history, that is, the Kerma period (e.g., Osypiński 2010). So far, no sites of this chronology have been recorded in the Af-fad region, and there is a kind of “hiatus of Kerma settlement” between the Letti Basin and the Fourth Cataract region. It is generally assumed that relics of late-

prehistoric occupation could reach well into the desert, beyond the scope of current archaeological prospection. Hence the decision to explore more extensively two sites, Afd135 and Afd139, and to reconnoiter the immediate area in search of additional loci of a similar nature.

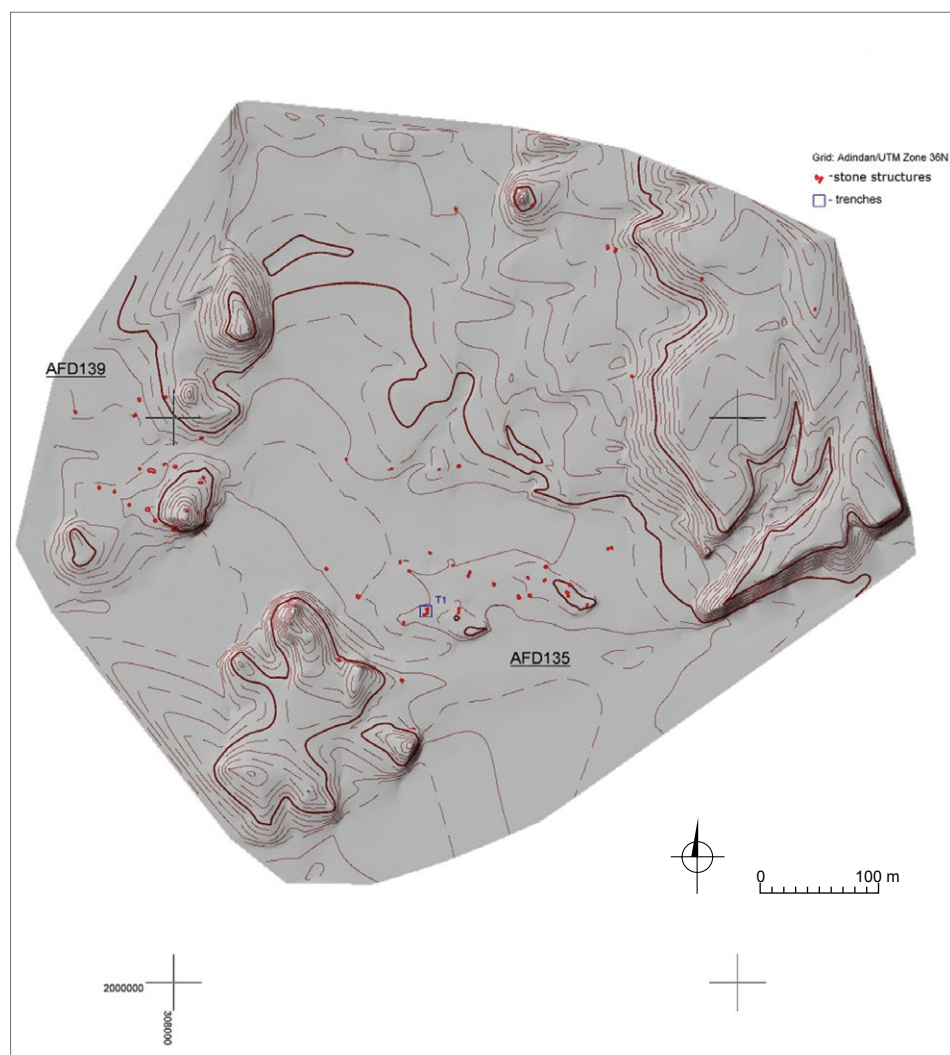


Fig. 2. Hipsometric map of the area with location of sites Afd135 and Afd139 (PalaeoAffad Project | measurements and mapping P. Wiktorowicz)

SITE AFD135

Rectangular structures resembling stone boxes are scattered over a fairly large area (approximately 300 m by 100 m), in a slight depression between the rocky hills. They are spread out rather than clustered [Fig. 2]. Reconnaissance in the area indicated that the structures even reached a separate site in the neighborhood (Afd139).

The structures are approximately 2.00 m by 1.00 m in size, oriented in-

consistently and built of boulders up to 0.40 m in diameter, set in sand. A group of four distinct stone structures was explored [Fig. 3]. Orthophotographic documentation of each arbitrary level that was cleared in the course of the excavation failed to reveal any cuts. No skeletal remains were found. A negligible set of animal bones, fragmentary ceramics and charcoal was recovered from a trench area of 10 m by 10 m.



Fig. 3. Excavated area at site Afd135 (PalaeoAffad Project | orthophoto and processing R. Łopaciuk)

These structures resemble the superstructures of Christian burials (box-graves), but the inconsistent orientation and grouping of several such boxes over a fairly large area indicate that it was not a medieval burial ground. Moreover, no parallels have been found among the known cemeteries from late prehistory in the region. Since the funerary purpose of these structures has not been confirmed in any way, they could be related to hu-

man occupation, either as dwellings or drinkers for animals. Both interpretations are possible considering the nature of the small finds.

Among the pottery finds there is a fragment of a bowl decorated with a metopic ornament (see Philips and El-Tayeb 2003) and several fragments of objects made of sherds of handmade kitchen pottery [Fig. 4]. These objects can be related most likely to the early



Fig. 4. Pottery finds from Afd135 (PalaeoAffad Project | photos M. Osypińska, J. Kokolus)

Makurian period. Radiocarbon dating of the charcoal found between elements of the stone structures fully confirms these assumptions: Pos-153048, 1520 ± 30

BP = 530–608 calAD (95.4% probability). The meagerness of the finds and obvious reuse of items (broken pottery sherds) indicate the nomadic character of the users.

SITE AFD138

The site encompasses a complex of heavily damaged stone structures which are of roughly circular shape, with a diameter up to 3 m. Unlike Afd135, they were located on the tops of a small range of hills. Exploration of the immediate area around the site revealed the presence of a number of other analogous loci. In the case of these structures, they were provisionally attributed to the Kerma horizon.

The first structure that was explored looked like a plundered burial. However, the stones scattered on the surface did

not conceal any kind of burial chamber. Neither were there any finds, like pottery, for example, which could enable a dating of these remnants. It should be assumed that it was a structure somehow related to settlement in the area.

The other explored feature was confirmed as a funerary structure. In this case, stones were piled in a mound, measuring approximately 3.00 m in diameter and 0.50 m in height. This superstructure did not seem to be plundered [Fig. 5]. Underneath was a small chamber

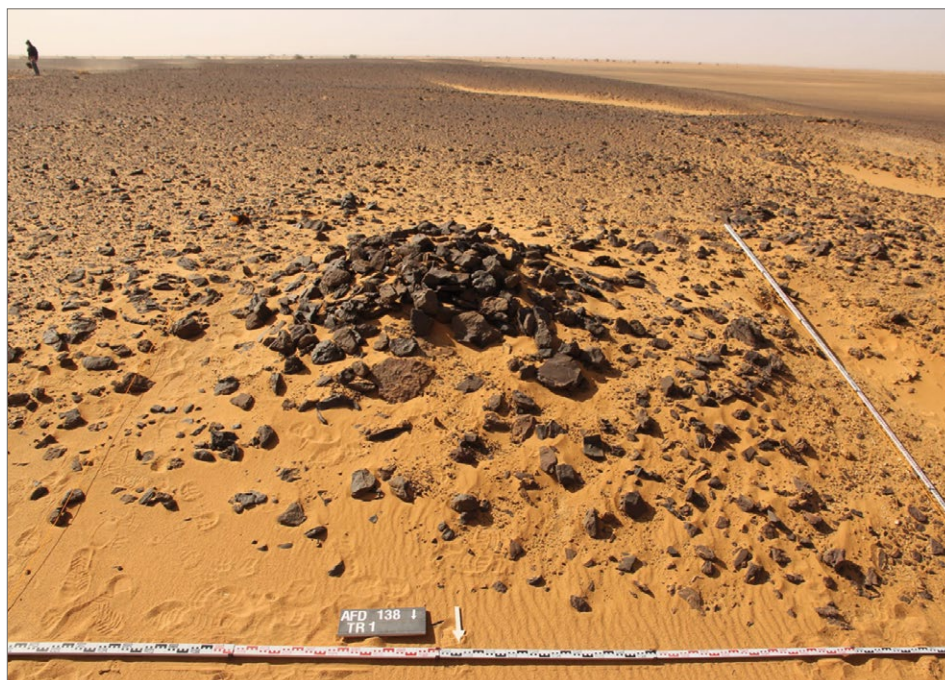


Fig. 5. Stone tumulus at Afd138 before exploration (PalaeoAffad Project | photo P. Bobrowski)

of oval shape, hollowed in bedrock, with a small dromos approaching it from the north. Lying at the bottom of the cavity was a fragmented skull of an infant, clearly facing west [Fig. 6]. It was not accompanied by any equipment or body ornaments.

Taking into account the form of the burial, it should be associated with the post-Meroitic horizon, although this identification could not be confirmed for lack of any small finds whatsoever.

The presence of post-Meroitic pastoral cultures is fairly well confirmed in the region, unlike the Kerma Culture horizon, although so far most of the large tumulus cemeteries have been found much closer to the river (Żurawski 2003; El-Tayeb 2003).

One should not exclude a temporal and functional relationship between the two studied locations (Afd₁₃₅ and Afd₁₃₈), as well as other, very similar sites in this zone.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The unexpected data deriving from the final season of fieldwork in the PalaeoAffad Project highlight the way in which the valley fringes were used as pastoral areas

in the mid-1st millennium CE. In the researchers' experience from the first years of the project, groups of camels numbering a few animals were observed to pen-



Fig. 5. Burial of a child under a stone tumulus at site Afd138 (PalaeoAffad Project | photo P. Osypiński)

etrate the zone, but they apparently did not stay there permanently, and moved to the river for watering. The presence of pastoral installations so far away from the river valley, as attested by the results of current explorations, shows that it was possible to collect water locally (during the rainy season?). The number of these installations clustered in one spot suggests that the herds consisted of more

than a few animals. Assuming this was the case, the results from Afd135 could markedly contribute to a reconstruction of animal management patterns at the dawn of the Makurian period. Long-distance trade, including cattle, has been confirmed by the latest isotope and archaeozoological studies of faunal material from Banganarti, Selib and Old Dongola (Osypińska et al. 2022).

Assoc. Prof. Marta Osypińska

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4603-9245>

Institute of Archaeology

University of Wrocław

m.osypinska@uwr.edu.pl

Justyna Kokolus

<https://orcid.org/>

Independent researcher

j.kokolus@wp.pl

Paweł Wiktorowicz

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3897-0948>

Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology

Polish Academy of Sciences

pawel@wiktorowicz.com

Marzena Cendrowska

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6140-555X>

Wear Analysis Laboratory

The Zinman Institute of Archaeology

University of Haifa, Israel

marzena.cendrowska@gmail.com

Roman Łopaciuk

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8144-912X>

Institute of Mediterranean and Oriental Cultures

Polish Academy of Sciences

r.lopaciuk@geomatic.eu

Dr. Marek Chłodnicki

Archaeological Museum in Poznań

chlodnicki.marek@gmail.com

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Beata Piotrowska

Independent researcher
bpiotrowska777@gmail.com

Jakub Sobko

Independent researcher
jakub.sobko@gmail.com

Huyam Khalid Madani

National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, Sudan
huyamkhalid@yahoo.com

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