The Wadi Abu Dom Itinerary. Preliminary Campaign 2009

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The Wadi Abu Dom in the Bayuda desert

The region within the large bend of the river Nile, approximately between the cities of Omdurman and Korti, is called Bayuda. This wide desert is formed by rocky areas – most impressive the volcanic region in the middle of the Bayuda – sandy plateaus, and some wadis leading the seasonal rainfalls into the river Nile. The most prominent wadis are the Wadi Muqqadam and the Wadi Abu Dom (Fig. 1). Both served in antiquity as routes for transport. A part of the Wadi Muqqadam is even today the main road from Khartoum/Omdurman to the Northwest. In connection with the building of that modern road a survey was carried out by M. Mallinson (1998), where he identified several sites of different periods. It seems clear that the Wadi Muqqadam was one of the main trading routes but lost importance in medieval times. A Meroitic administrative centre with buildings and cemeteries was identified by T. Kendall, who started excavation at the site of Al-Meragh (Kendall 2000).

Wadi Abu Dom was part of the route between Meroe and Napata (Fig. 2). These two towns were the capitals of the Kingdom of Kush. Meroe, north of the 6th cataract, was the administrative headquarter with the royal residence and, in the Meroitic period, with the royal cemeteries. Napata, in the north at Jebel Barkal (but not identified with certainty yet), was the sacred centre with the temples of the main gods. Close by were the royal cemeteries at El-Kurru and Nuri, which were used during the Napatan period. The designated Kushite king had

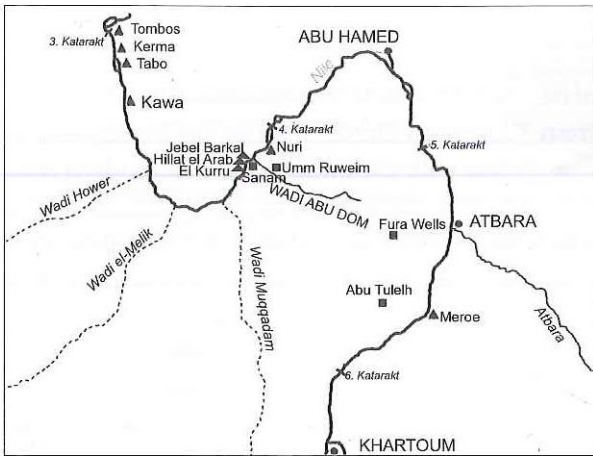Fig. 1. The Wadi Abu Dom. (Photo: T. Karberg)

Fig. 2. *Map of the Bayuda with the 'King's Road'. (Drawing: A. Lohwasser)*

Fig. 3. *The Napatan remains in Qubbat el-Hajj. (Photo: T. Kendall)*

to travel from his palace in Meroe to Napata to receive the crown of Amun. Then he embarked on the coronation journey which took him to the major centres of the Kingdom.

The trip from Meroe to Napata was recorded repeatedly on Napatan royal stelae, but only on the stela of King Nastasen (4th century BC) we learn some names of places along the route. The first overnight stop named jsd-rst is mentioned, which was identified as Abu Tuleih in the Bayuda (Wainwright 1947; Shinnie 1955). The village where the 'King's Road' reached the River Nile was called t-qa. There the priests of Amun waited for the king to lead him across the river. It was suggested that this place may have been either Nuri or Sanam, both of them on the left bank of the river (Peust 1999, 223; Lohwasser 2008, 282–283) . Nuri, the burial ground of the Napatan kings, is situated 7 km upstream of Jebel Barkal; Sanam, a prosperous town, 4 km downstream. Another suggestion was brought forward by Tim Kendall. He was informed by Faiz Hassan Osman about the remains of a Napatan temple wall in Qubbat el-Hajj. This village is situated exactly opposite Jebel Barkal and may have served as embarking station. Today the Napatan wall is covered by a new mosque; therefore a more detailed investigation is impossible.

Apart from being the 'King's Road' of the Kushite monarchs, the Wadi Abu Dom served as a main trading route, which connected the roads leading north to Egypt (from Napata via Kerma) with those leading east across the Eastern Desert

to the Red Sea and Arabia, and those leading south, up the Blue and White Niles to Ethiopia, as well as those leading to the west. Numerous trade goods, exotic materials and Mediterranean imports, are spread over the whole Kingdom. If we accept that the functioning of the Kushite Kingdom was based on the distribution of luxury goods, we have to expect traces of the organisation of the long-distance trade (Edwards 1996). Therefore, installations like caravansaries, wells, storage buildings, control posts, etc. should indicate a trade route. H. N. Chittick and P. L. Shinnie made an exploration journey in 1951 through the Wadi Abu Dom and followed the track through the Bayuda up to Meroe (Chittick 1955). They visited the ruins of Umm Ruweim, Umm Quweib, and Umm Kharfour and made sketch plans of the then visible remains. These ruins can be possibly linked with the trade through the Wadi Abu Dom.

The project Wadi Abu Dom Itinerary (WADI)[1]

An intensive survey in the Wadi Abu Dom (about 130 km) should help to clarify the important itinerary between the two capitals of the Kingdom of Kush. We hope to find various remains which

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Fig. 4. Neolithic pottery and stone axe. (Photo: T. Karberg)

In the first season[2] we surveyed the area between 18°27′00″N / 31°53′50″E and 18°25′50″N / 31°56′30″E. More than 100 archaeological sites was identified, ranging from the Palaeolithic to late medieval times. Since we did not included excavations or trial pits in this stage of the project, all estimated dates are based on surface collections.

We identified two large Palaeolithic sites which may have been workshops. The Neolithic phase is also attested there by sherds and lithic artefacts as well as one stone axe (Fig. 4). There were several traces of the Old Kush period; we identified tumuli with associated potsherds. The cemetery site 12/13 consists of tumuli and graves of the periods of Old Kush, early Napatan and Post-Meroitic (Fig. 5). There we found sherds of all these phases (Fig. 6). The main occupation period visible at present at the end of the Wadi Abu Dom dates to the Middle Ages. Of that period the site of Ghazali was already partly excavated by P. L. Shinnie and H.N. Chittick in 1954. They concentrated on the church and monastery

enable us to interpret the Wadi Abu Dom as a trade route as well as the royal track. Moreover, we will focus on the chronological depth of the Wadi to reconstruct its cultural landscape. Thus, cemeteries as well as habitation sites and sacral places will be recorded.
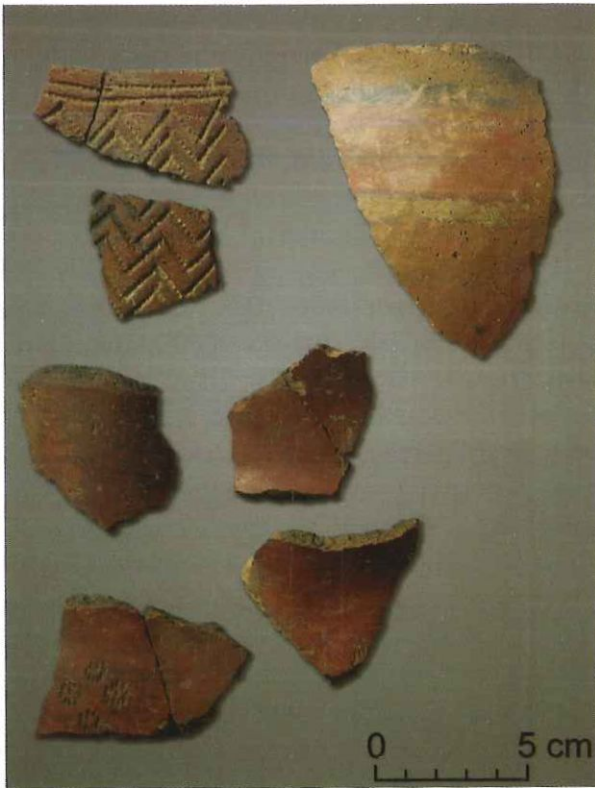
Fig. 5. The cemetery Site 12/13.

Fig. 6. Sherds of Old Kush, early Napatan and Post-Meroitic date of the cemetery site 12/13. (Photo: T. Karberg)

Fig. 8. Medieval potsherds. (Photo: T. Karberg)

(Fig. 7) (Shinnie & Chittick 1961) while in the surrounding area there were box-grave cemeteries, a town with enclosure, and a small medieval village. Near the town several mounds of slag are situated. A piece of slag was already analysed and brought an evidence for medieval iron production at the site.[3] Medieval potsherds are abundant in Ghazali, but also in the whole of the surveyed area (Fig. 8).
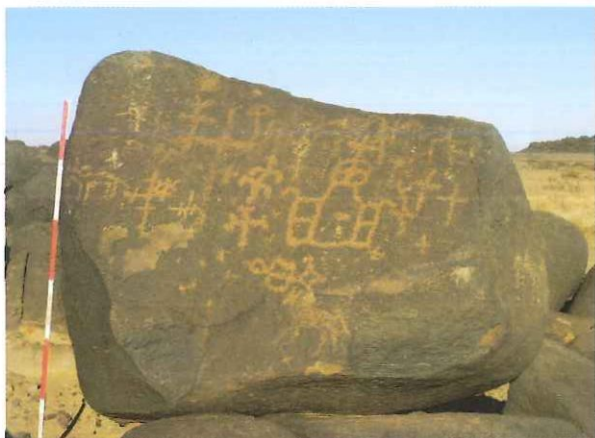
We noticed that the visible footpaths in use today had also been used in ancient times, since

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[3]   The analysis was kindly done by Ü. Yalçın, Bergbaumuseum Bochum, Germany.

Fig. 7. The church of Ghazali. (Photo: T. Karberg)

Fig. 9. Rock drawings. (Photo: T. Karberg)

we found not only significant number of potsherds concentrated along these tracks, but also ancient tethering stones, and, on rocks beside the paths, numerous rock drawings and graffiti (Fig. 9).

We will continue the detailed survey and recording all kind of features. We hope to be able to compile an itinerary which will help to find answers to questions concerning the 'King's Road', the trade route and the cultural landscape of this area.

Survey of Umm Ruweim, Umm Quweib and Umm Kharfour

We made two journeys to the known sites of Umm Ruweim, Umm Quweib and Umm Kharfour. We have not investigated them yet, but discussed date and function of the structures at the spot.[4] These structures were generally considered to be of Meroitic date and may have had a commercial or military function (Chittick 1955, 90–91). However, we suggest to reject the latter interpretation, since none of the structures have fortifications such as bastions, towers, fortified entrances or defence walls etc. Moreover, all of them are located at the bottom of hills and it would have been easy to seize (Fig. 10).

Two of the ruins, namely Umm Ruweim I and Umm Quweib, show a complex architecture (Fig. 11, 12). Both are surrounded by a double wall with small rooms in between walls. Since the inner

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[4]   At one of the trips we were accompanied by Tim Kendall and Silvia Zauner-Mayerhofer, both of them shared their opinions with us.

Fig. 10. Hills in Umm Ruweim. (Photo: T. Karberg)

Fig. 11. *Umm Ruweim I and II. (Google)*

Fig. 12. *Umm Quweib. (Photo: B. Żurawski)*

and the outer walls have equal dimensions (each 1.1 m wide), the outer wall cannot have served as fortification. In Umm Quweib the border of rooms surrounds a court which seems to be empty. In Umm Ruweim I a second border of rooms was built inside the outer one, and a single building forms the innermost part. Potsherds found at both structures are, at a first glance, of Post-Meroitic and medieval date, but the architectural features remind us very much of Meroitic architecture. Terraces, ramps, and a slightly shifted axis of the central building have parallels at the Great Enclosure of Musawwarat es-Sufra.

Fig. 13. *Openings in the walls of Umm Ruweim. (Photo: T. Karberg)*

The other two buildings, Umm Ruweim II and Umm Kharfour, seem to comprise only open courts surrounded by a wall with one or two entrances (Fig. 11). Box-grave cemeteries directly outside each of them seem to indicate its use during the Medieval period. Therefore, these four complexes might not date from the same period, as was hitherto commonly suggested.

Although its function remains unclear so far, we believe that their use for military purpose is unlikely. The inner and outer walls of Umm Ruweim I and Umm Quweib have small holes (approx. 0.2 x 0.2 m) about 0.4–0.8 m above the floor (Fig. 13). These holes cannot have served for fire arms since they are too small for aiming, and the hills are directly in front of them. The suggestion that they were used as the sockets for beams to elevate a floor is equally not suitable, since the holes are in different position on either wall.[5] Another possibility is their use as air conditioning for perishable goods. The holes allow the air to circulate through the small rooms and cool them down. Possibly goods were stored in these rooms which needed lower temperatures. If this sugges-

tion is correct, the structures Umm Ruweim I and Umm Quweib can be interpreted as stockroom or distribution centres, where people and animals (?) stayed in the open court, and perishable goods were stored in the small rooms surrounding the court. We hope to investigate at least some of these structures archaeologically in the next field seasons.

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[5]   This was noted by D. Welsby in the discussion in Gdańsk.

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