

K E R M A

2013-2014 and 2014-2015

SOUDAN

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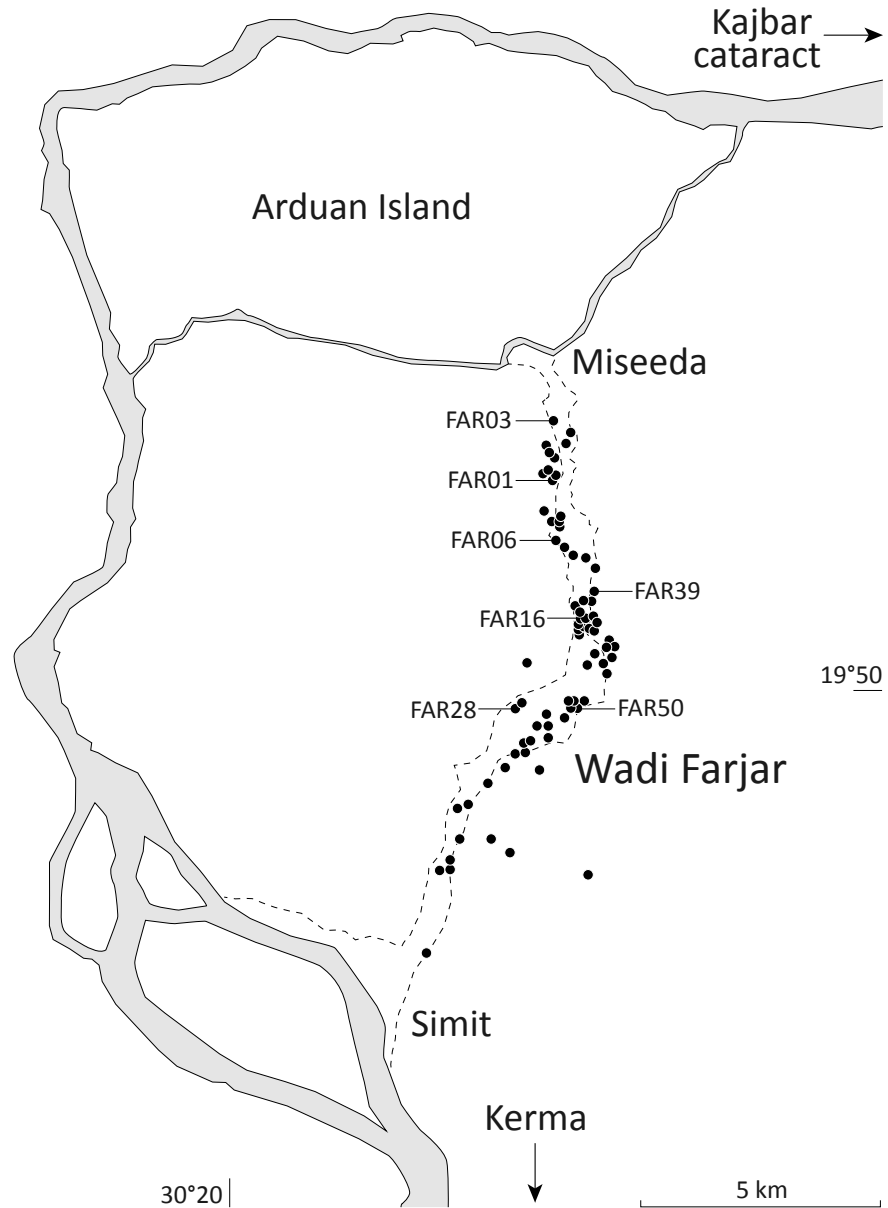
Cover figure : The "grave of the archer" found in the cemetery of Kerma by Charles
Bonnet in 1982 and reconstructed for the exhibition "Aux origines des pharaons noirs,
10'000 ans d'archéologie en Nubie" held at the Laténium Museum (2014-2015).

Photo: Laténium, Marc Julliard

Wadi Farjar is located in the Third Cataract region, on the right bank of the Nile and along an ancient wadi that must have been a branch of the river, flowing further to the east (figure 2). This wadi extends from the bank of the Nile at Simit in the south to the small town of Miseeda in the north, rejoining one of the branches of the river after its characteristic bend westward. Its general axis is north-south and the distance it travels from one branch of the Nile to the other is approximately 13 km. This arid zone comprises several granite outcrops and few alluvial deposits. The rugged terrain, the distance from the Nile and silt accumulation present little interest to human occupations. Other than tracks that cross it, the site is not endangered from human activities, notably the expansion of cultivated areas. The survey project was initiated in 2012 following an appeal from the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM). In the event of the construction of a dam at Kajbar, north of Wadi Farjar, several archaeological sites in the Third Cataract region would be threatened. For this reason, survey areas were defined by NCAM and assigned to international teams having an interest in survey work in this region and even in studying the most interesting sites. Today, it appears that this dam is not a priority amongst the numerous hydroelectric projects along the Nile contemplated by the government.

The region was the subject of surveys during the 1990s as part of the “Mahas Survey Project,” a collaboration between David N. Edwards, Ali Osman and the University of Khartoum (Osman and Edwards 2011). At that time, 51 archaeological sites were identified. As was noted by the researchers, the wadi must have been active during most of the Holocene, as attested by the presence of oyster shells in the alluvial deposits (*Etheria elliptica*) found near site FAR39 and radiocarbon dated to the 7th millennium BC. According to the typological dating of the sites discovered during these early surveys, the majority fall between the Mesolithic and Kerma periods. Few sites more recent were discovered, although stone walls were noted but could not be precisely dated. At first analysis, Wadi Farjar appears to be a Nile palaeochannel active as early as the Mesolithic (9th or 8th millennium BC), drying up by the end of the Kerma period, during the 2nd millennium BC. We know that the climate was more humid during the first half of the Holocene, notably during the African Humid Period (circa 10,000-3,000 BC, DeMenocal et al. 2000, Manning and Timpson 2014, Otto-Bliesner et al. 2014). The moving north of monsoon rains and the high Nile levels can easily explain how a Nile palaeochannel could have been active at Wadi Farjar and how it dried up progressively during the 2nd millennium, eventually prohibiting permanent settlements in the vicinity. We know of similar scenarios further south in the Kerma Basin (Honegger 2007) and the Northern Dongola Reach (cf. Macklin et al. 2013).

Figure 2 / Map of the area of Wadi Farjar in the third cataract, with the location of the sites identified during the survey. The number of the sites mentioned in the text is indicated.



Surveys conducted during the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 seasons consisted of returning to the sites identified by Osman and Edwards in order to date them more precisely and to obtain a better idea of their archaeological potential. Additionally, we tried to contribute to earlier knowledge by identifying possible new sites. Forty-six of the 51 sites discovered by our predecessors were identified. Surface finds were collected and the sites benefitted from further examination. Generally, when these sites reveal the presence of structures on the surface (tumuli, stone circles, hearths, etc.), they almost systematically show traces of recent excavations or surface cleaning. This was notably the case for sites FAR01, 03 and 16, where stone

Figure 3 / Wadi Farjar, site FAR01 discovered by Osman and Edwards. A deep trench was recently dug in the stone structure, probably a tumulus. Some Kerma sherds were found around it.



Figure 4 / Wadi Farjar, site FAR16 discovered by Osman and Edwards. This stone structure probably dated of Kerma period is crossed by a recent trench.



structures were deeply dug into the emptying out of a well or deep trenches dug in the middle of tumuli, to reach in all likelihood the funerary chamber (figures 3 and 4). The dramatic development of gold mining in Sudan over the last few years has resulted in increased traffic in desert zones and a heightened interest in the possible riches yielded by archaeological sites. We have experienced this phenomenon during the excavations at the Mesolithic site of Wadi El-Arab, where illegal excavations – often very deep holes dug into the previously studied areas – were conducted numerous times during our absence (Honegger 2012). Our ongoing excavation in this desert zone undoubtedly triggered the interest of gold diggers, especially since



Figure 5 / Wadi Farjar, site FAR06 discovered by Osman and Edwards. Many of these stone walls have been identified in the area.

sediments were systematically sifted and this may have been interpreted as searching for gold. However, the fantasy of unearthing a priceless archaeological find may also have caught the attention of treasure hunters. Our observations at Wadi Farjar appear to corroborate this change in attitude and every isolated archaeological site is now put in serious jeopardy. The fact that this region has long been identified as possibly containing ancient gold deposits is certainly known to gold diggers, who take the opportunity to search the surrounding archaeological sites.

The archaeological remains of Wadi Farjar can be grouped into two categories. In the first group, the sites feature stone structures easily identifiable on the surface, whether we are dealing with low stone walls (figure 5), tumuli, stone circles or rock carvings. The second category comprises more discrete and generally eroded sites with materials such as ceramics, lithics and, more rarely, faunal remains. Few structures are present, if only eroded hearths forming small mounds, caused by the hardening of silt by fire (figure 6). We conducted surface cleaning at prehistoric sites that revealed ceramics that were not too fragmented. At the moment, no archaeological stratum has been found in situ. In general, erosion is substantial and the sites with visible stone structures are actually those most likely to contain preserved vestiges below the surface – whether they be wells, burials or other structures with foundations dug into the soil. These sites do not appear to predate the Kerma period.

In addition to the 51 sites reported by Osman and Edwards, 24 new ones were discovered. Generally prehistoric sites (Mesolithic, Neolithic or Pre-Kerma), these contain rather discrete vestiges. Out of these 75 sites, several present multiple occupations, which gives a total of 88 distinct occupations overall. These are essentially dated between the Mesolithic and Kerma periods, with a few rare sites with later occupations. We have proposed an initial dating of these occupations based on the typology used at Kerma for several years (Honegger 2014a). However, due to lack of associated archaeological remains, not all these sites could be dated. This is notably the case of the numerous low walls, which Osman and Edwards often refrained from dating, even if the hypothesis that they could date to the Kerma period is plausible. Rock carvings, some tumuli and sites having suffered major erosion could not be dated either.

Only 53 of the 88 occupations could be dated. Compared with sites discovered in the Kerma region, we notice certain constancies, such as the fairly high frequency of Neolithic deposits assigned to the 5th millennium BC, of which ceramics with burnished surfaces and frequent comb decoration are characteristic (figure 7). In contrast, Wadi Farjar has revealed significantly more Pre-Kerma sites (figure 8) and particularly sites dated to the Kerma period. Having at hand an estimate of the number of sites per period allows us not only to ponder the density of past occupations, but also the representativeness of our finds. From this perspective, the comparison between the situation at Wadi Farjar and in the Kerma region is interesting (figure 9). On one hand, Wadi Farjar is mostly unaffected by recent human activities and should give us a relatively representative image of the past. On the other, the region of Kerma spreads over an immense alluvial plain, highly cultivated. Although a few large and archaeologically rich sites remain, the smaller

Figure 6 / Wadi Farjar, site FAR39 discovered by Osman and Edwards. This site is composed of fireplaces forming small mounds.





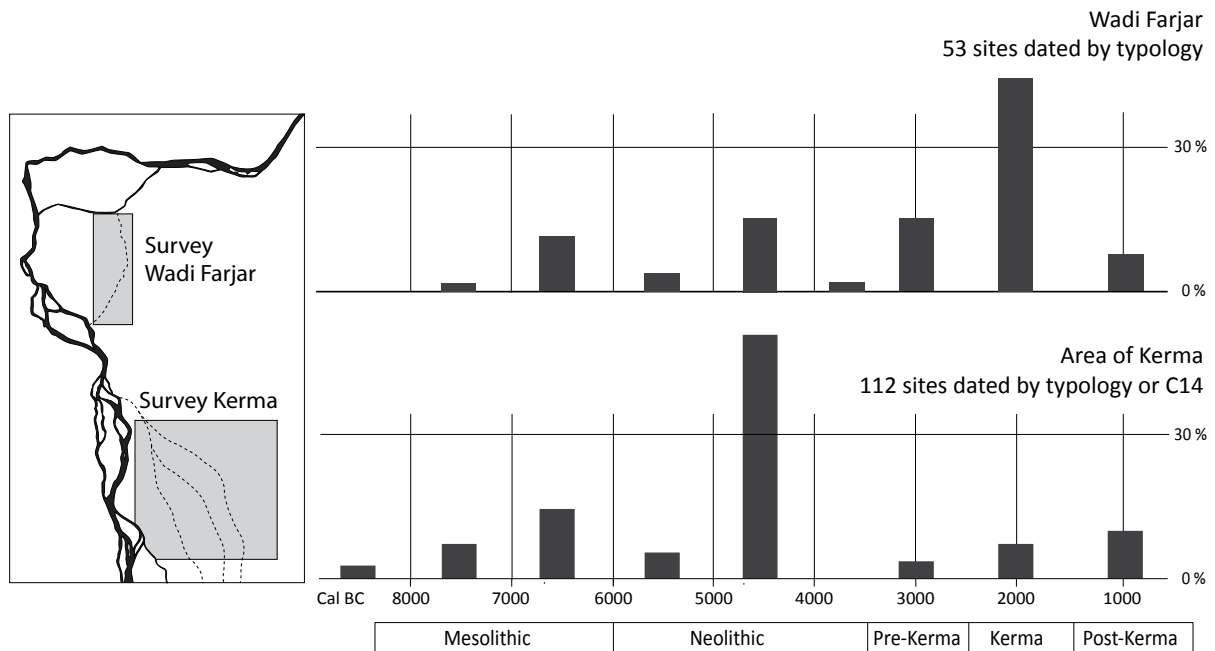
Figure 7 / Wadi Farjar, site FAR50. Pottery sherds dating from the 5th millennium BC.

Figure 8 / Wadi Farjar, site FAR28. Pottery sherds dating from Pre-Kerma period (3500-2500 BC).



and more discrete deposits must have disappeared – unless they are located in the desert, along the cultivated plain. At Wadi Farjar, the Mesolithic is less well represented, possibly due to a less rich environment, and the post-Kerma sites are rare because of the aridity. The number of 5th millennium BC sites is proportionally much lower than at Kerma, a contrast reflecting the intensive research in the cemetery at Kerma, which has resulted in a substantial increase in the number of sites. At Wadi Farjar, however, the proportion of these sites is also reduced, due to the fact that Pre-Kerma and Kerma sites are considerably more abundant than in the Kerma area, where they have been largely obliterated by agricultural practices. The picture at Wadi Farjar therefore appears to be more representative of historic reality. As is the case at Kerma, there appears to be few sites dating from the 6th millennium BC and the drop in the number of sites from the 4th millennium BC is equally apparent. It is only at the end of this millennium that the number of sites increases again, to reach a peak during the Kingdom of Kerma.

Figure 9 / Comparison of the proportion of Holocene archaeological sites between Wadi Farjar and the Kerma area.



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