

K E R M A

2009-2010

SOUDAN

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Cover figure : figurine of a giraffe found in the Kerma cemetery during the 2009-
2010 season. Dimensions : 6x4x2 cm. Photography : Philippe Marti.

MESOLITHIC AND EARLY NEOLITHIC HABITATION REMAINS OF WADI EL-ARAB

This site, located near the desert, is one of the most important in Africa for the study of the first sedentary settlements and the progressive adoption of domesticated cattle (Honegger and Bonnet 2009). The area opened last year (sector 611W) was extended this season to a surface of 128 square meters in order to better understand the spatial organisation of the successive settlements identified. Two clearings of 5 to 7 cm were made in levels dated by C14 analysis to 7200-6300 BC.

In the first half of the area opened last year, the presence of a hut was confirmed with foundations dug in the sandy soil at a depth of 30 centimetres. Its shape is more or less circular and its diameter slightly over three meters. It is similar to the habitation structures found a few years ago at el-Barga and dated to 7500-7200 BC. Close to this hut three pits containing more faunal remains and artefacts (mainly lithics and sherds of pottery) were clearly defined. The discoveries in the new area are exceptional for this period. A grave near the surface was excavated (figure 2) and five habitation structures were identified, accompanied by four pits (figure 3). Three of the habitation structures were dug in the soil and correspond to the first phase of occupation. The two other are older and correspond to another type of architecture. These huts were outlined by groups of stones used to secure the posts that supported the walls and roof, as revealed by the foundation of one of them.

Figure 2 | Grave discovered in the centre of a hut and may be linked with its foundation.



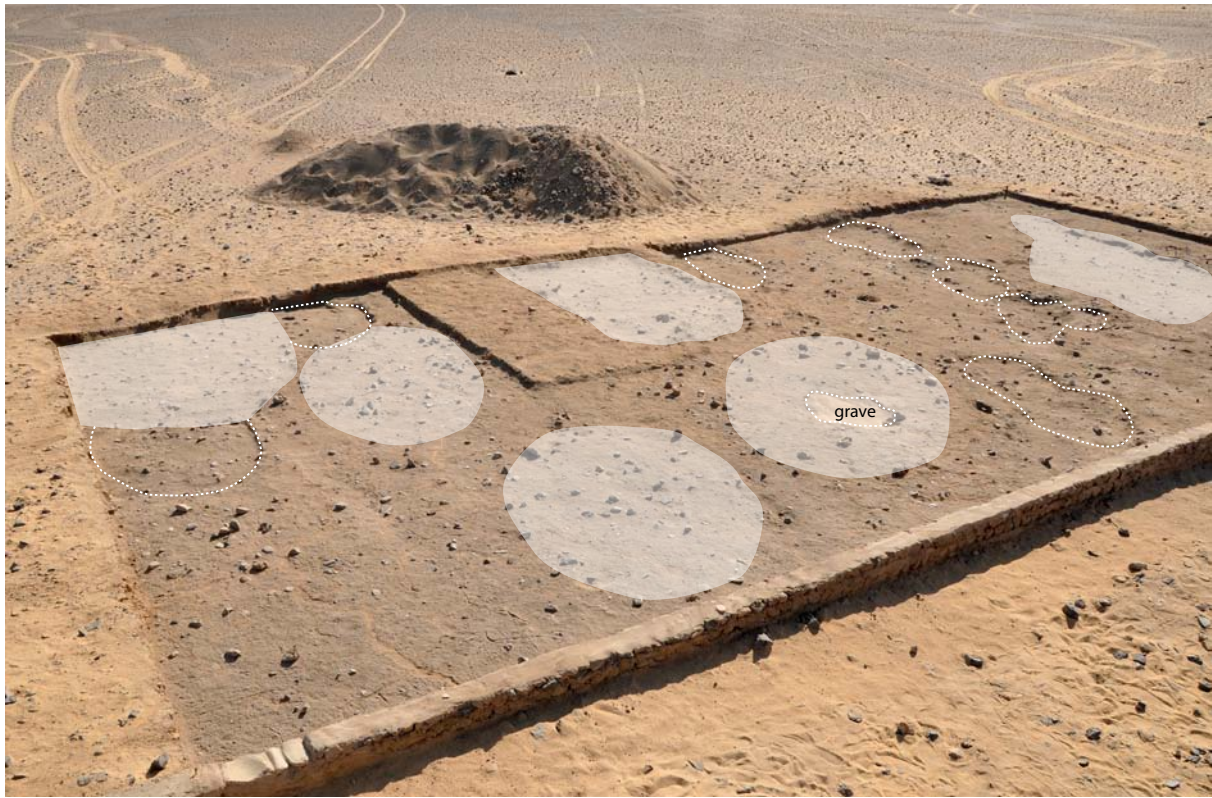


Figure 3 |View of the 128 m² area opened in Wadi el-Arab, which revealed the presence of six huts (white circles) and many pits (dotted lines).

The latter was centred on a human body previously placed in a pit possibly linked with the foundation of the habitation.

As usual for this site, the artefacts are abundant and correspond mainly to destruction levels. For this reason they were taken by surface units of 4 square meters which permit to gain saved time in the excavation process. The sediment was sieved with screens of 2 to 5 mm. Among the faunal remains, two new bones of domesticated cattle were discovered (Honegger and Chaix, forthcoming).

Wadi el-Arab is the only site in Africa that reveals the remains of a Mesolithic village with many successive phases characterized by the presence of clearly identified habitation structures. In the Nile Valley, the well known site E-75-6 at Nabta Playa, dated around 7000 BC, is characterized by similar huts with foundations dug in the sand (Wendorf and Schild 2001). The alignment of the huts suggests a general organisation of the settlement along a main street (figure 4) and it seems that Wadi el-Arab follows a similar plan, if we consider the alignment of the three huts belonging to the more recent phase. Since the excavation of the habitation structure at el-Barga and a first preliminary report on Prehistoric habitations in Sudan (Honegger 2006), new excavations have revealed habitation remains dated to the Mesolithic. In Central Sudan near Omdurman some habitations were partly built with earth (*galus*) in a stratified settlement of the same period as Wadi el-Arab (Salvatori and Usai 2009).

Close to Kerma on Saï Island, postholes and some oval structures dug in the sand seem to correspond to Mesolithic occupation, but the C14 dates are more recent (Neolithic period) and the attribution of the remains is still problematic (Garcea 2006).

Wadi el-Arab gives the possibility to explore the organisation and the functioning of successive sedentary settlements of the beginning of the Holocene. Due to the depth of the stratigraphy, it is probable that this succession has a duration of two millennia.

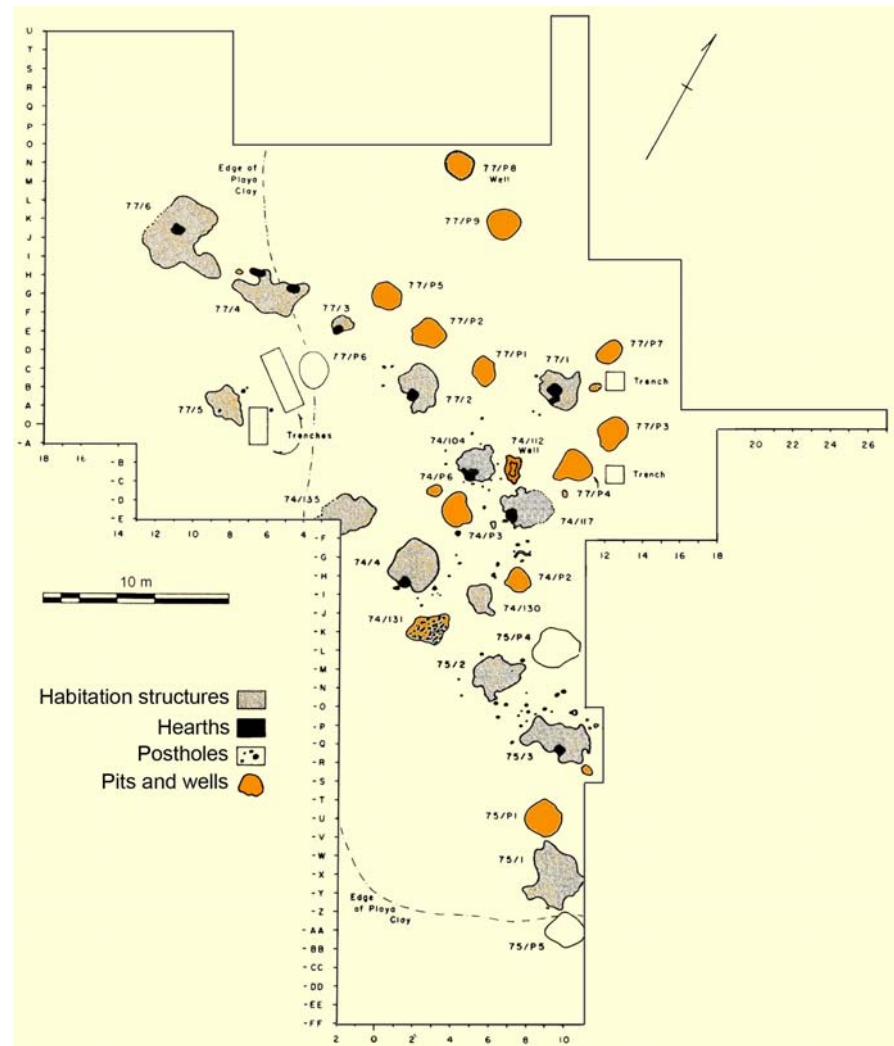


Figure 4 | The settlement E75-6 at Nabta Playa with its huts aligned along a kind of street (after Schild et alii 1996, figure I: 104, modified).

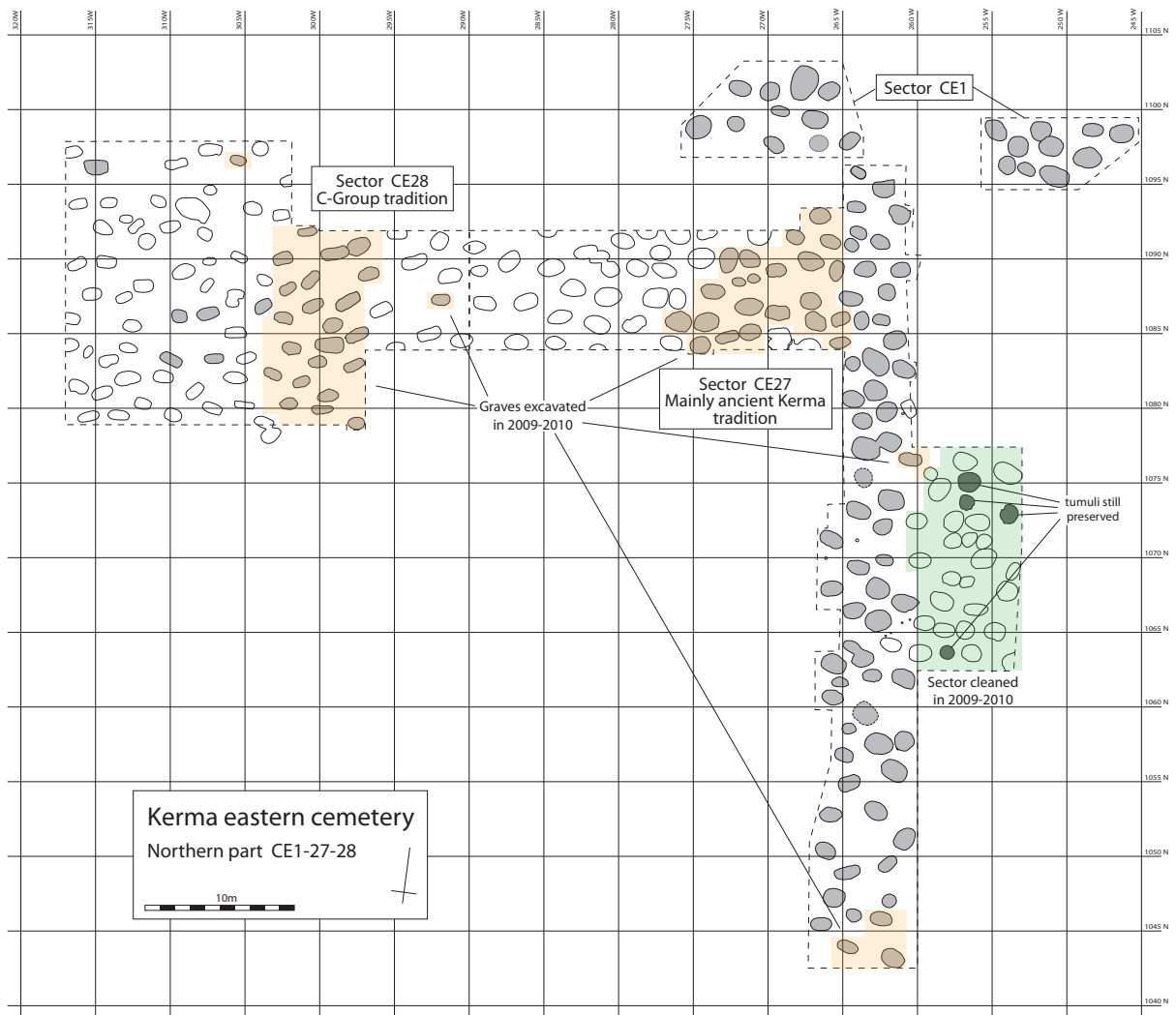


Figure 5 | Plan of the excavation in the northern part of the eastern cemetery with the different sectors and their cultural tradition.

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