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Cover figure : Wadi el'Arab, excavations in 2010. Photo: Philippe Marti.

Last year we worked on a new surface of 128 square meters which revealed exceptional habitation structures from ca. 7000 BC (Honegger and Bonnet 2010, p. 3-5). At the beginning of this campaign, we noticed for the second time that the site was heavily destroyed, probably by people looking for gold or for statues. About ten holes were dug in the excavated area, the largest attaining two meters of diameter. We decided to continue the excavation in the western half of the surface, which was less affected (sector 610W), and to dig in the other sector a stratigraphic trench in the area of the largest hole.

Figure 1 | Wadi El-Arab. View of the western part of the studied area, which was excavated this year. Two large oval structures dug in the sand correspond to the foundations of huts. The other small pits are the results of the destruction of the surface by people searching for gold or statues.

The successive cleanings of the western surface conducted us to a better delimitation of the best preserved habitation structures which are composed of two large oval huts with foundations dug in the sandy silt (figure 1) and two other completely different with postholes blocked by stones below the surface (figure 2). This last one appears to be more ancient than the dug ones, which are associated with numerous shallow pits (figure 3). As usual the archaeological remains discovered were extremely abundant (flint, pottery sherds, shells, ostrich eggshells and animal bones). The





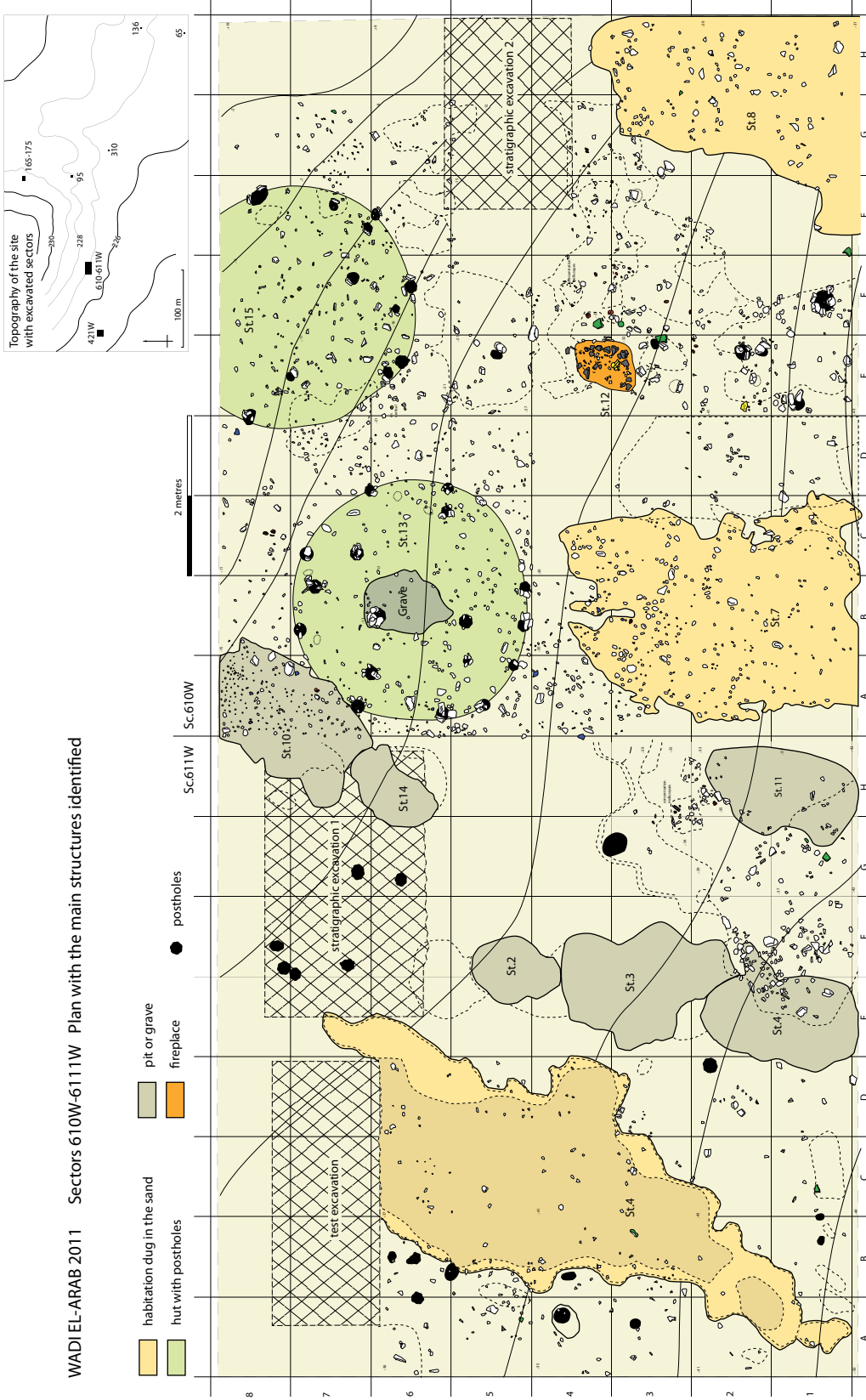
Figure 2 | Wadi El-Arab. View of a hut with postholes blocked by stones.

faunal remains were in a good state of preservation, which is not common in semi-arid conditions. This will give us a good opportunity to work on the hunting practices of this period, and to reconstitute the environment which was much more humid than today, with the presence of animals such as rhinoceroses, hippopotami, giraffes, lions, etc. In this perspective the work of Louis Chaix consisted this year in sorting the bones coming from the excavation and to confirm the presence of domesticated cattle in strata comprised between 7200 and 6500 BC (Honegger and Bonnet 2010).

Figure 3, page 5 | Wadi El-Arab. General plan with the structures identified. The huts with foundations dug in the sand (St. 4, 7, 8) and the shallow pits (St. 2, 3, 4, 11, 14) are probably contemporaneous. Two huts evidenced by postholes are older (St. 13, 15), as well as the fireplace (St. 12).

The general organisation of the excavated area is coherent even if the recognized structures belong to at least to two different occupational phases which are dated between 7200 and 6500 BC (figure 3). The most ancient remains are composed of the two huts (St. 13-15) delimited by postholes and a fireplace with rubefied stones (St. 12). Other postholes and some areas more silty with many artefacts which could belong to the same phase. The more recent remains correspond to pits and three huts with foundations dug in the sand. These huts are more or less aligned and could belong to a well organised settlement. Only one grave is present in this area, located at the centre of a hut. But the previous excavations in sector 611W revealed three other tombs. They should correspond to a cemetery, which is probably dated to the end of the sixth millenium BC. It is difficult to know wether there was a contemporaneous settlement at Wadi El-Arab, since that level is today

WADIEL-ARAB 2011 Sectors 610W-611W Plan with the main structures identified



probably completely eroded. To know whether there are graves associated with the habitation structures presently excavated, as is the case for the Mesolithic occupation of El-Barga (Honegger 2004: 27-32, 2006), it would be necessary to discover new tombs in deeper layers.

When sector 611W was opened during the 2008-2009 season, a first test excavation was made to obtain an idea of the thickness of the archaeological layers. The presence of large pits dug by looters, led us to dig in trenches in two locations down to the natural deposits (figure 4). The objective was to obtain some stratigraphic cross-sections to study the succession of the archaeological layers characterized by a high density of human structures. In sector 611W we observed in four stratigraphic sections traces of occupation on a thickness reaching 80 cm. The different layers and the limits of the structures were identified with good precision, and the accumulation of faunal remains or shells helped us define the outlines of some structures. As can be seen on the eastern stratigraphy (figure 5), the succession seems to be relatively simple but it



Figure 4 | Wadi El-Arab. The stratigraphic excavation in sector 611W gives the opportunity to study the succession of the layers and the limits of the structures.

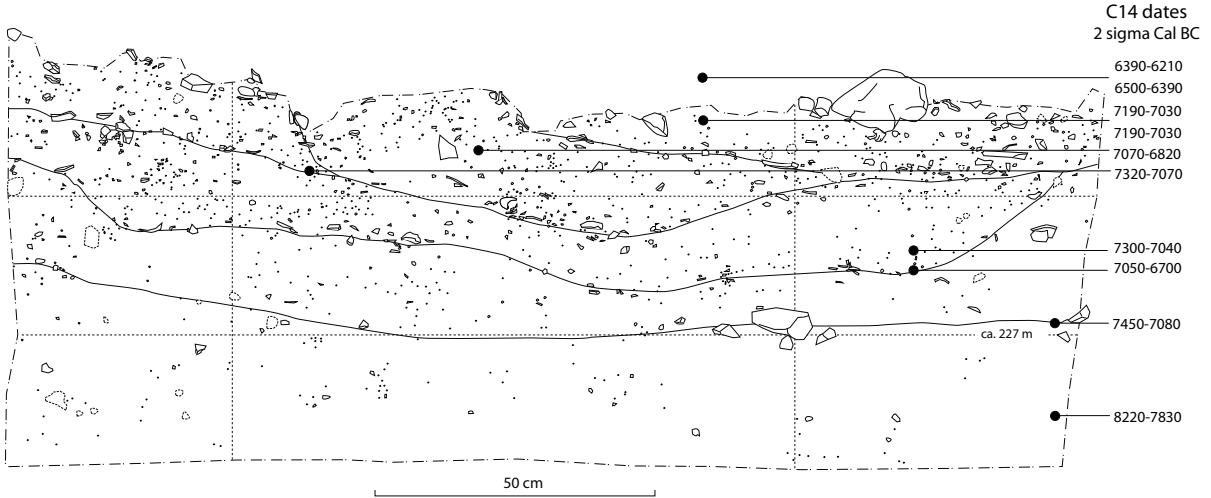


Figure 5 | Wadi El-Arab. Eastern Stratigraphy of the trench dug in sector 611W. The C14 dates are presented in their stratigraphic position. They are made on samples coming from different parts of the excavation and are comprised between 8200 and 6200 BC.

in fact appears that the three top layers consist of large superimposed structures. The observations of the cross-sections in the second trench (sector 610W) confirm the high density of habitation structures. It is therefore evident that the management of the surface excavation of a large area will be a difficult challenge, consisting in the delimitation, correlation and dating of the numerous structures.

Ten C14 dates have been obtained from samples of ostrich eggshell collected in different places on the surface and in the sections. Their result accompanies the drawing of the eastern stratigraphy (figure 5) with the indication of their location in the different layers or structures. The general view of the chronology is relatively coherent with dates comprised between 8200 and 6200 BC. However,

some inversions are noticed with results younger than those expected based on their stratigraphic position. This can be explained by the necessity to correlate separate structures or layers with the objective of showing all the dates on the same stratigraphy. The fact that some of these correlations remain hypothetical until the complete excavation of the entire excavated area could explain the discordance observed between vertical succession and absolute chronology. A comparison with the chronology of the previously excavated area at Wadi El-Arab, undertaken between 2005 and 2007 (sectors 165-175, Honegger 2007) indicates that both of these surfaces, 150 metres apart, were occupied during the same period. The actual excavation revealed a longer period of occupation (2000 years) compared to the previous one, which is known from 23 dates ranging between 8200 and 6600 BC. This is not surprising given that the first excavation (sectors 165-175) was more exposed to erosion. It is possible that the last period of occupation (6500-6000 BC) has completely disappeared in this area, as noted above and that it is evidenced by the surface graves. The discovery on the surface of lithic tools with bifacial retouch confirms the presence of this latest occupational phase (Honegger and Bonnet 2010, p. 6). This kind of lithic technology appears in Southern Egypt ca. 6000 BC, at the same time as the introduction of sheep and goats from the Near-East (Wendorf and Schild 2001). The introduction of this technique in Sudan is probably contemporaneous, and confirms the presence of eroded layers around 6000 BC.

With the presence of well preserved habitation structures and graves, a thick stratigraphic sequence covering a major part of the Early Holocene period and the possibility to follow the first introduction of domesticated cattle in Africa, Wadi El-Arab represents a unique opportunity to study in details this important period in the history of the continent.

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