

K E R M A

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Université de Neuchâtel
Documents de la mission archéologique suisse au Soudan
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THE EARLY HOLOCENE SEQUENCE OF WADI EL-ARAB

This site is located 5 km north-east of El-Barga and includes a stratigraphic sequence of occupations dated between 8,500 and 6,000 BC. It is one of the very important sites of Africa that helps understand the transition to a sedentary way of life and stock breeding (Honegger 2007).

This year, an area of 64 square meters was excavated where three graves were discovered two years ago (sector 611W, see fig. 2 and 3). The aim was to preserve this part of the site - which was plundered last year - in order to complete the chronological sequence and to find more graves. The destruction was more important than any previous disturbances and impeded the excavations as work resumed in this sector. As previously noted at this site, the material discovered consists primarily of several lithic artefacts, fragments of ostrich eggshells and ceramic sherds. Faunal remains are less frequent. Some structures were identified : a pit of domestic function; a probable habitation structure dug in the sand; some pebbles' concentrations (fig. 4). The pits contained greater quantities of artefacts and better preserved bones. One grave was discovered and we hope that a cemetery will be located in the future. Due to the abundance of material and the precision required for the excavation of Mesolithic sites, only fifteen centimeters were cleared in this area. The excavation of this sector will continue for the two next years.

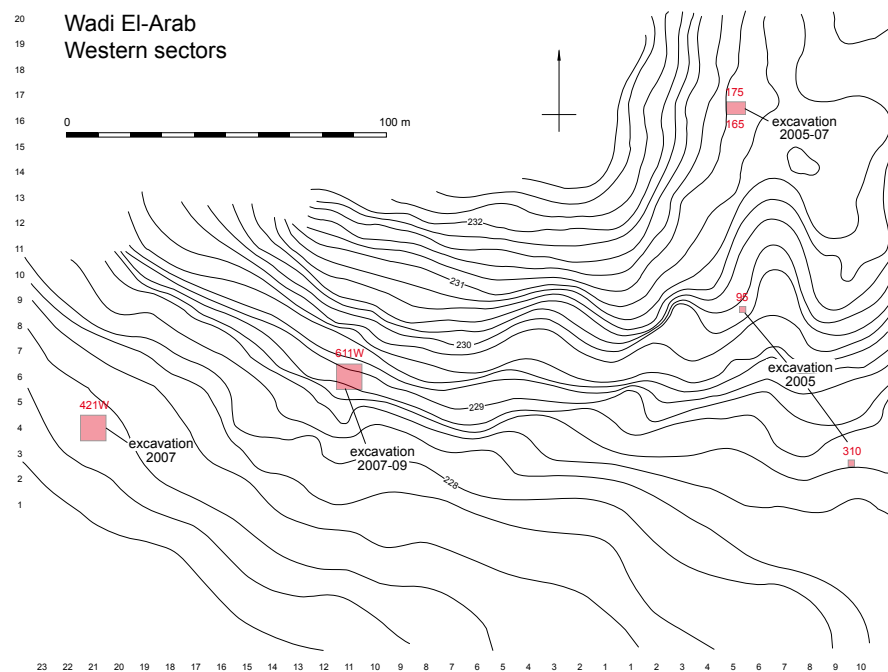


Figure 2 | Western sectors of Wadi el-Arab with the location of trenches and excavated surfaces.

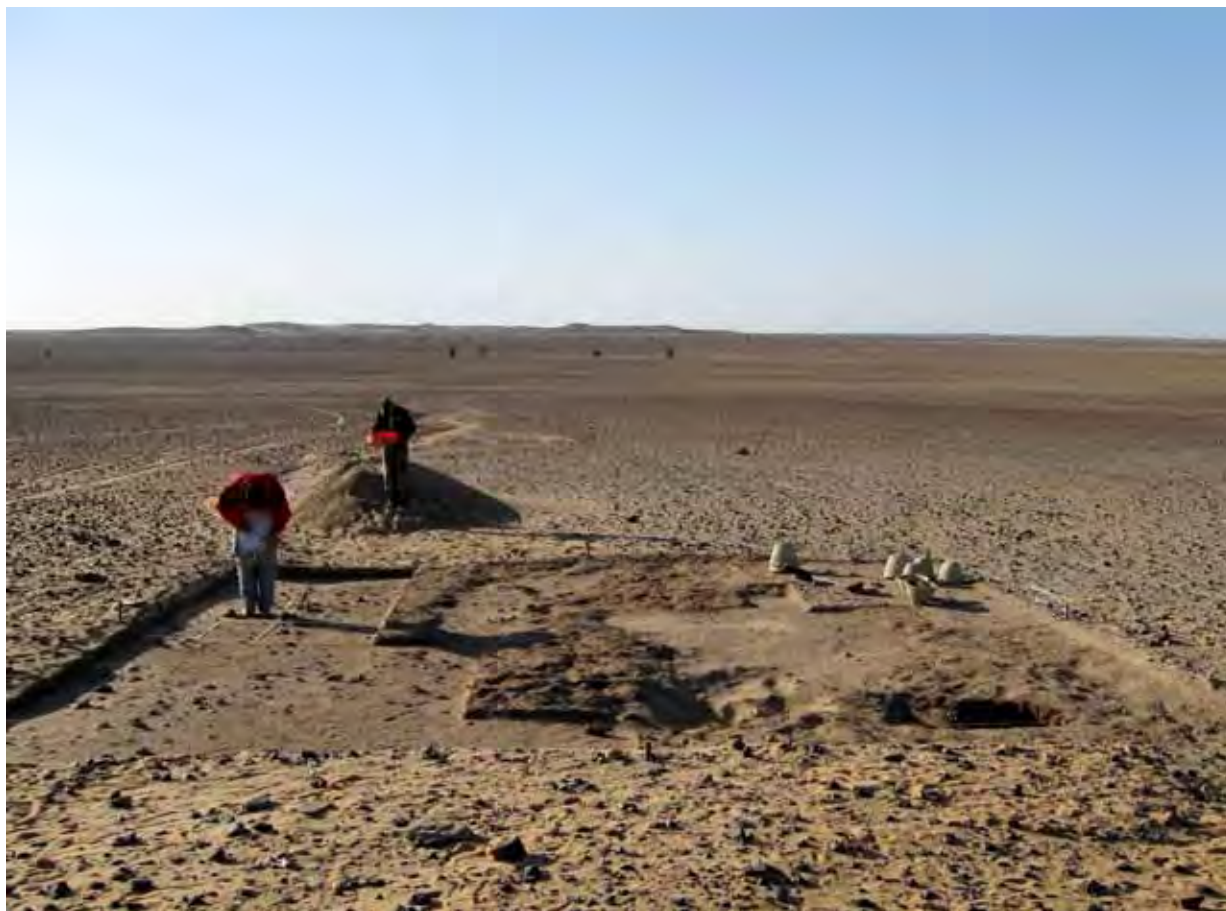


Figure 3 | View of the sector 611 during excavations.



Figure 4 | A concentration of pebbles which can correspond to the limit of a wall of the habitation structure or to a structure linked to a fireplace.

Figure 5 | The tomb 7 after excavation.

First, the 64 square meters surface was cleaned and carefully cleared in order to delineate possible structures and holes resulting from the pillage of the site. Then a second clearing of five to eight centimeters allowed us to define the five structures identified. These are rather well defined pits, generally containing a distinctive fill and occasionally less fragmentary remains. While the anthropogenic nature of several pits is undeniable, it is more problematic for three of them because they might have been affected by erosion and disturbances. The largest measures approximately three meters in diameter and its depth is over twenty centimeters. The structure might be the floor of a hut, but further excavation is necessary before this can be confirmed.



A tomb was discovered on the surface north of the sector, adding to the three found previously (fig. 5). Rather disturbed by its proximity to the surface, the body of the deceased is missing part of its cranium and most of the bones of the right side. The deceased rested in a flexed position on its left side, the head towards the west and facing north. In contrast with one of the graves excavated in 2006, which revealed a necklace made of Red Sea shells, no burial goods were found in association with this tomb. These burials should be dated to between the 7th and the beginning of the 6th millennium BC. The material discovered during the excavations is abundant and the density of artefacts - notably flints and ceramics - is high. The two clearings brought to light 6941 pieces carved from siliceous rock (the majority from the alluvial flint called chert as well as a few pieces in carnelian and rock crystal).

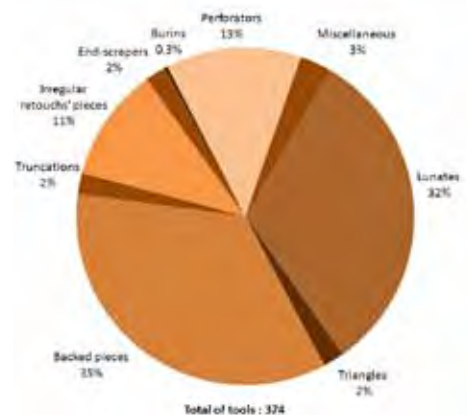


Figure 6 | Proportion of the different types of flint artefacts found in sector 61 I.

We note 249 nuclei and 3323 flakes, among which the rare blades. The ratio of transformation into tools is low : only 374 pieces, the majority of which are segments (fig. 6).

Figure 7 | Pottery discovered in the first two clearings of the sector 611.



A more in-depth study is needed to reveal possible influences that might appear in these lithic implements, but, at first glance, Egyptian influences are practically non-existent and flint from the chalky limestone environments of the North does not appear to have been imported. There is one exception, however. Two bifacial points found on the surface north of sector 611 might have an Egyptian origin considering their scarcity in Nubian prehistory. They might otherwise be fragments of spear points dated to the Kerma period, such as the quartz ones found in the city of Kerma or the famous examples from Mirgissa. They would thus be isolated finds linked to the Classic Kerma fort located nearby.

The ceramic sherds are occasionally of large dimensions and often entirely covered with impressed motifs (fig. 7). These complete the series originating from sectors 65/75 and 95 currently under study, which indicate an evolution between 7800 and 6600 BC. The diversity of motifs is rather similar to that already known, with a few new variants. The assemblage clearly shows that we are dealing with a sequence situated at the beginning of the 7th millennium BC, represented with rocker stamp, dotted wavy line and herring bone pattern (alternating pivoting stamp) decorations. It is possible that future successive clearings will reveal previous occupations. In any case, this chronological bracket is rather interesting for the study of the transition to a pastoral economy with the appearance of domesticated cattle (cf. Honegger 2005). It shall also allow the evaluation of the impact of southern Egyptian influences (Nabta Playa), which appear at this period. In this context, the meticulous gathering of faunal remains is paramount and numerous bones were consolidated before sampling in order to insure a better preservation. Yet, this year, the first faunal inventory made by Louis Chaix did not reveal domesticated cattle, as had been the case in previous years at Wadi el-Arab.