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PRELIMINARY REPORT OF THE FIRST FIELD SEASON OF THE KERMA CEMETERY MOG034 ON MOGRAT ISLAND, SUDAN

INTRODUCTION

The site MOG034, near the village of Karmel on Mograt Island, Sudan, was the focus of the first excavations of the Mograt Island Archaeological Mission (MIAMi) project from the 11th January to the 5th of March 2014.¹ The site is located on an elongated rocky ridge at the southern end of the hamada.² The ridge, located about one kilometre south-east of Karmel, contains a dense concentration of small separated clusters of graves as well as few individual tombs spreading over its entire area. Assuming their relatedness we decided to encompass all visible grave superstructures on the ridge under MOG034.³ The fieldseason was divided into two parts. During the first two weeks a field survey took place; this was followed by excavations of different grave types that had been revealed by the survey. Thanks to previous work, including surveys and excavations conducted by the Humboldt University Nubian Expedition (H.U.N.E.) in 2006 and 2008,⁴ the team was able to continue the fieldwork immediately after the arrival.

THE SURVEY

The field survey was divided into two steps. At first a walkover survey was carried out, aimed at recording the superstructures of all features present on the ridge. Photographs and descriptions were made

of each feature identified. Descriptions included presence or absence of structural properties, construction materials, suggested dating and evidence of any disturbance. All features were located with a hand-held GPS to take an average point location to increase accuracy.

The second aspect of the field survey was mapping of all features identified. This aimed to create a digital terrain model (DTM) of the ridge and its surroundings in order to record the location, relative topographic position and current state of preservation of the features identified. Height measurements were recorded at 5m to 10m spacing, depending on the terrain, across the whole of the ridge. Additional height recordings were taken 1m to 2m apart on features previously identified during the walkover survey, with additional detail added where necessary. These heights were supplemented by an interpretive line survey of the features inclusive of any detail, such as stone rings or rubble, that could be identified. The data was processed to create a 2D plan of the features as well as 3D DTMs of individual tombs and tomb groups.

The survey area, measuring 627m north to south and 356m east to west, rose to a maximum height of c. 332m m.s.l., 20m above the level of the Nile. The ridge must have been a quite prominent landmark in antiquity, clearly visible from the south-western to the south-eastern Nile terrace.

In total 106 features were identified on the ridge during the walkover survey (fig. 1). The character of these features ranged from well preserved circular stone structures, to scatters of rock, thought to represent disturbed tombs, and cut features possibly relating to tomb robbing. Features were ascribed numbers F001 to F106. It was possible to identify several groupings of features on the ridge as well as on the slopes. The cemetery is characterised by a combination of dispersed individual graves and nucleated groups spread over the entire ridge, a familiar pattern for tombs of this type in this region.⁵

1 The field team comprised the authors and for part of the time also Claudia Näser, Gemma Tully, Lilli Janotte and Hassan Mustafa Alkhidir (NCAM). We like to thank all the team members of the Mograt Island Archaeological Mission, especially Hassan Mustafa (NCAM) and our local supporters, without them we could not have been successful. We thank Claudia Näser who commented on a first version of this paper.

2 Ritter 2008, 85–87.

3 A first survey by Mathias Lange in 2006 and an excavation by Reinhold Schulz in 2008 have been undertaken, describing only the tumuli of the southern area of the ridge as MOG034.

4 Näser 2006, 2008; Ritter 2008; Schulz 2008; Lange 2012.

5 Wolf and Nowotnick 2007: 29–30.

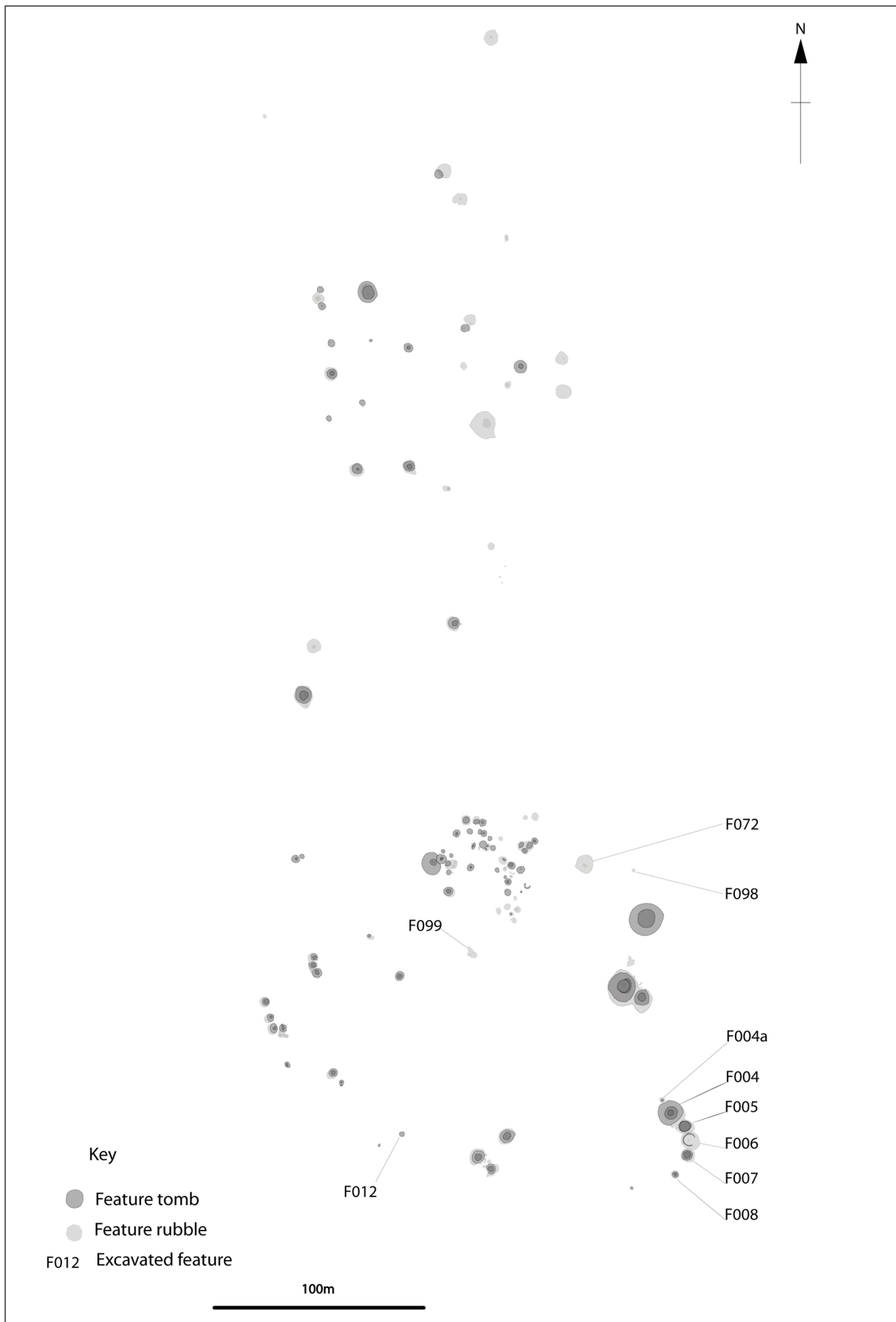


Fig. 1: Features identified during the survey. Excavated features are labelled (drawing: Gareth Rees)

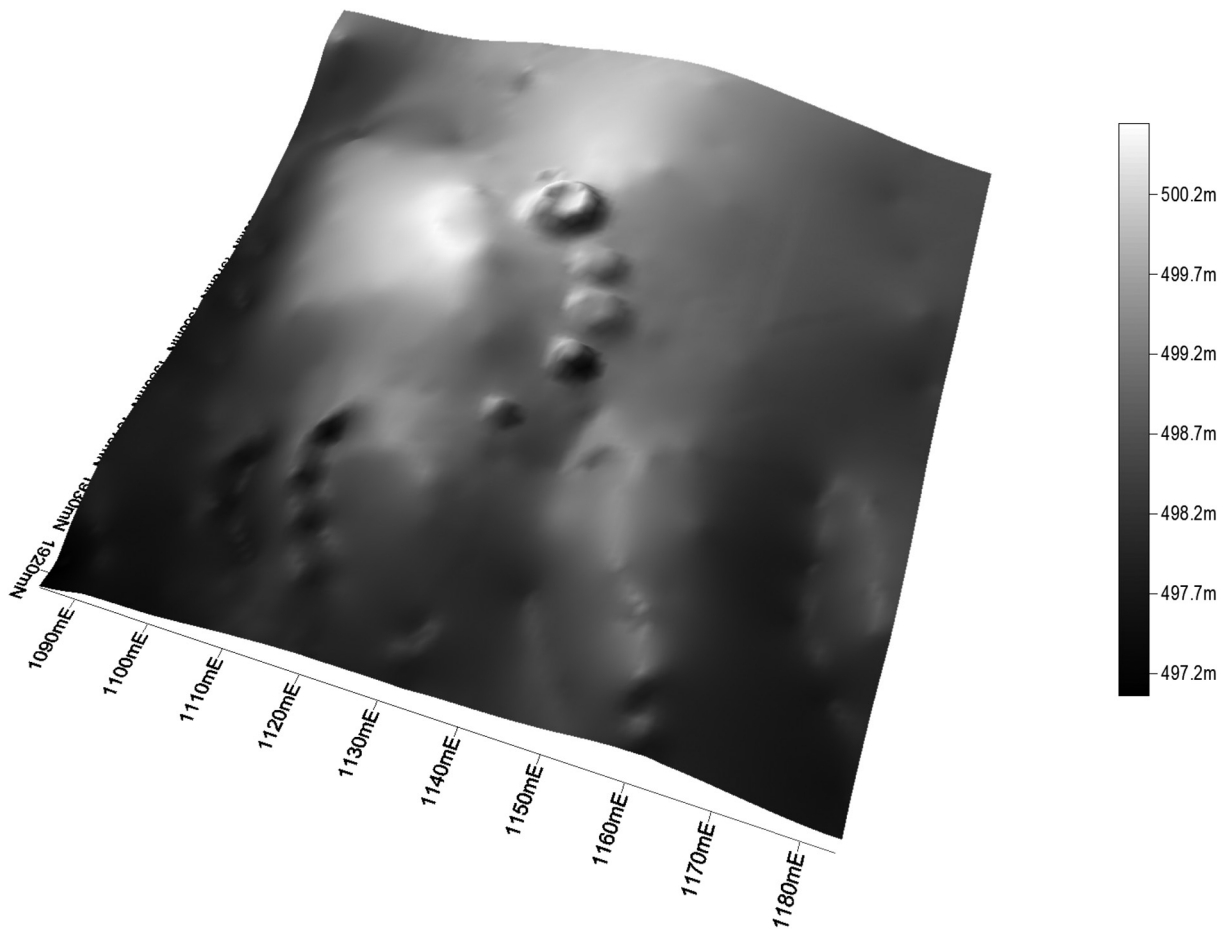


Fig. 2: Topographic model of the south-eastern tomb group (data processing, image generation: Gareth Rees)

THE EXCAVATION

Due to the numerous salvage campaigns in the 4th Cataract region there is a huge amount of data concerning burial types of different periods.⁶ Unfortunately so far much of these data come from surveys, so the description is mainly based on the visible properties of the superstructures and published in a simplified or abstracted way. The current interpretation of grave superstructures is unreliable at best and is in need of clarification through excavation to verify detailed observation.⁷ Furthermore, there were signs of ancient and recent grave robbery of the visible features which might obliterate future prospects of analysis. Therefore one aim of the fieldwork was to determine specific structural aspects of different types of superstructures. By taking a detailed excavation-based approach to the composition of these types of burial we can improve on character-based

⁶ Borcowski and Welsby 2012: 15–21.

⁷ At site 3-O-380, a superstructure of the Middle Kerma type FT04b at first sight, revealed a post-Meroitic burial (Welsby 2007: 18).

typologies for an archaeological culture or period lacking comparative material like pottery or C14 dates.

Following the survey and mapping, several features were identified which were to be prioritised for excavation. So the decision was made to start excavating a small cluster of tombs in the south-eastern part of the ridge, south of Feature 001 (F001), a large tumulus previously excavated in 2008.⁸ Four other features, F012, F072, F098 and F099, were also investigated.

THE SOUTH-EASTERN GRAVE GROUP

These burials are located on an outcrop to the south-east of the ridge. Features F004 to F008, five more or less circular grave mounds, measured from 3m to 12m in diameter (fig. 2). From the surface there appeared to be very little disturbance, but unfortunately each burial was looted. A targeted robbery

⁸ Schulz 2008.



Fig. 3: View of the superstructures of F004 to F007, post-excavation (photograph: Gareth Rees)

for the most valuable grave goods at the upper body is most likely, illustrated by the absence of skulls, a feature also noticed during excavations at the 4th Cataract.⁹ Nevertheless the stratigraphic sequences were documented in detail and revealed similarities but also distinctive differences in the construction of the superstructures. In comparison to the published

typology of the superstructures in the 4th Cataract region, the following graves could, if at all, be included in the types FT04a or b.¹⁰ However, there are striking differences in the structural properties between them as well as compared to the recent typology (fig. 3).

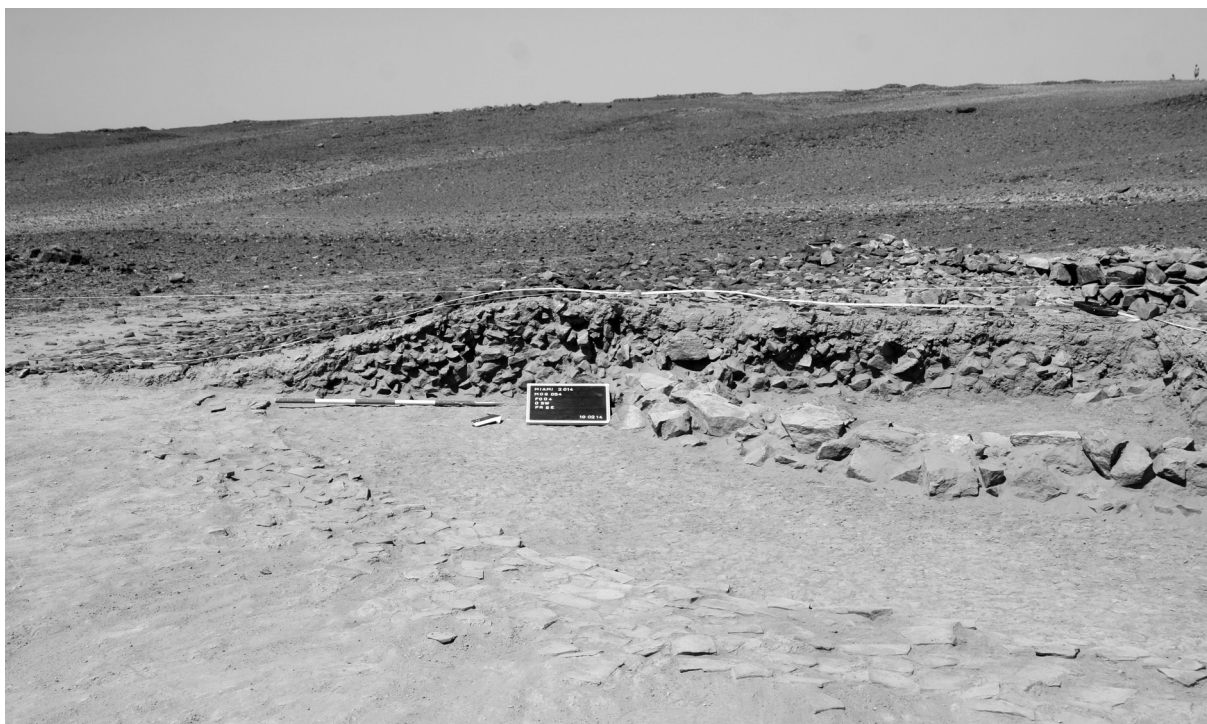


Fig. 4: Profile showing construction method of F004 (photograph: Jens Weschenfelder)

9 Petrick 2012: 119.

10 Borowski and Welsby 2012: 17–18..



F004

This feature was located at the northern end of the discrete group of tombs excavated to the south of the ridge. It was the largest tomb excavated, measuring about 12m in diameter and attaining a maximum height above ground level of about 0.60m. The superstructure was constructed around an inner stone ring consisting of large stone blocks of so far undifferentiated matrix rock measuring up to 0.45m in width and associated with a stone pavement of flat stone slabs. The inner part of the stone ring was filled by medium sized rocks. The mound itself was covered afterwards by layers of small stones, gravel and silt up to the inner edge of the pavement, so the highest elevation of the tomb was the stone ring itself (fig. 4). This construction was very similar to F001, excavated in 2008, which however had had a central covering of brown and white quartz pebbles.¹¹ The burial pit, measuring about 0.60m in depth from the ancient ground surface and 1.60m in diameter, was sub-rounded with steep sides and a flat base.

It was dug directly in the centre of the tomb. The pit contained a single adult burial, flexed on its right-hand side with its back flat on the base of the pit. The body had been positioned with its head to the east, however, the skull was no longer present. The body was covered by a layer of large blocks, similar to the stones of the ring structure. A stone artefact was recovered adjacent to the body along with fragments of leather which may originate from a wrapping of the corpse.

F005 TO F007

These features, located directly to the south-east of F004, consisted of roughly circular superstructures measuring from 5.70m to about 8.0m in diameter and rising to a maximum of 0.4m above the present ground surface. There was no stratigraphic relationship between these tombs and any other. The grave mounds were very similar to one another. An external stone ring was constructed at each of these features, primarily from medium to large rocks. The rings, circular in plan, stood up to 0.40m high and 1.0m wide. The inner parts of these rings were again filled by layers of small to medium sized stones, gravel and silt. In contrast to F004, which revealed an elevated ring, the rings of F005 to F007 were covered by the infill material.¹² The difference bet-



Fig. 5: F007, rock capping collapsed on to underlying burial (photograph: Gareth Rees)

ween ring structure and filling, especially in F007, was not always clear to determine. External to and abutting the ring, a pavement of flat elongated rock slabs laid length-ways parallel to the ring, had been constructed at F005 and F006.

The sub-circular grave pits, all more or less severely disturbed by robber cuts, were located in the centre of the superstructures, measuring from 1.20 to 2.10m from east to west, 0.80 to 1.70m from north to south and 0.60 to 0.90m in depth. The bodies of the adults in F006 and F007 had been placed in a crouched position, on their right-hand sides, with their heads to the east, although no skulls were preserved due to targeted robbery. The body of F005 was heavily disturbed but the few articulated remains uncovered indicated the same position. All the bodies were covered, or at least surrounded, by a layer of large rocks within the burial pit (fig. 5). Very few artefacts were recovered from these tombs; in total only two stone beads, a few pottery sherds and some leather fragments were preserved.

F008

The smallest feature, located 7m to the south-west of F007, consisted of a superstructure measuring 3m in diameter and a maximum of about 0.20m above the ground surface. The superstructure was formed of a sub-rectangular outer boundary, measuring 2.20m from north to south and 1.50m from east to west, consisting of small to large matrix rocks. This boundary 'ring' had been filled with small stones and silt which may have been naturally derived or could have been remains of the robbing. The circular grave pit measuring 0.90m in diameter and about

¹¹ Schulz 2008: 53–55.

¹² A similar superstructure has been excavated by Paner

and Borcowski (2007: 7–9) in the 4th Cataract region. Unfortunately it is not possible to gain an affiliation to a specific period

0.40m in depth from the ancient ground surface, had steep sides and a concave base. The body of an adult had been placed in the grave but had been heavily disturbed and almost completely disarticulated after burial. Only the left hand and the lower left leg and foot appeared to be in-situ and articulated indicating that the burial may have been laid on its left-hand side. Grave goods recovered during excavation consisted of organic material, including leather and the remains of wood, which may have been part of a basket. Like the other burials of the grave group, the body in F008 had been capped or surrounded by large rocks, a structural element also present in the 4th Cataract region.¹³

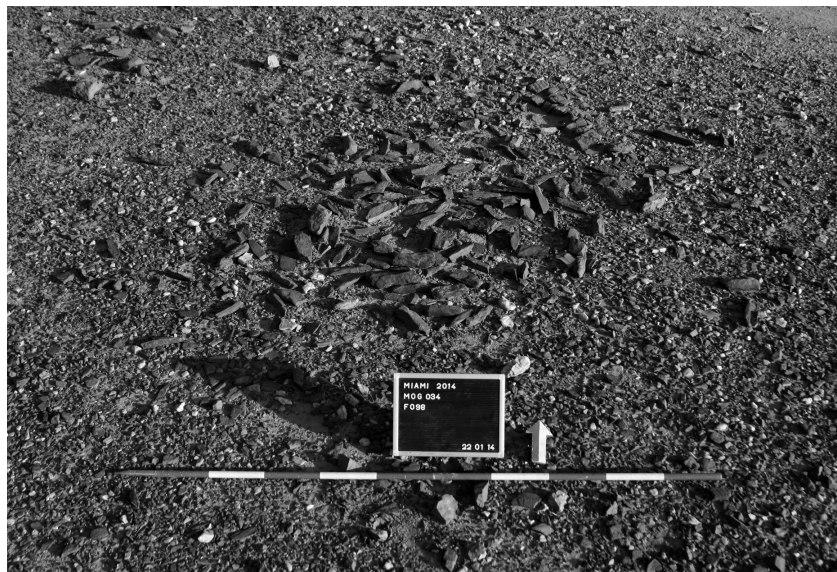


Fig. 6: F098, facing north, pre-excitation (photograph: Jens Weschenfelder)

The south-eastern grave group seems to reveal a development in the construction of the superstructure from south to north, while the substructure as well as the arrangements within the pit seem to remain unchanged. Not only the size of the mound increased but also some structural properties like the pavement become more distinctive in the northern graves. The construction of the tombs may be indicative of a chronological sequence, but the direction either north to south or the other way around is not yet clear. Due to the similarities in construction methods between F004 and F001, excavated in 2008, F004 could be dated to the Kerma Period, possibly to Middle Kerma (1950–1750 B.C.).

FEATURES WITHOUT SUBSTRUCTURES

Three features, differing in the construction of their superstructures, were located in the southern part of MOG034. F012 was located about 120m west of F004–F008. The cairn of piled bedrock and rose quartz rocks measured about 2.60m in diameter and 0.50m in height. No coursing or architecture was observed within or underneath the cairn. The function of this feature is unclear, but it could have been used as a marker or ritual place. F098 was located 18.80m to the east of the later described F072 (see below). It appeared on the surface as a concentration

of small flat stone slabs like the pavement of F004 forming a roughly east to west aligned core to the feature with outliers in all directions (fig. 6). The feature, measuring 2.10m from north to south and 1.8m from east to west, was thought to be a flat spiral type superstructure. Pottery located on the surface associated with this feature was thought to be an indication of a possible funerary context. No evidence of substructure or burials were uncovered in this feature or its immediate vicinity, however it may have functioned as a ritual place connected to either F072 or F001 to the south. Similar constructions in the Fourth Cataract region have been documented, but also lack a confident interpretation.¹⁴ F099 consisted of a superstructure measuring 3m in diameter with a further 3m of rock spread to the south, and was located 113m to the north-west of F004 and 90m to the north of F012. No archaeological features were uncovered during excavation of an 8m by 6m trench. However, lithics and pottery were recovered from the surface indicating a potential use as a working place or quarry.

F072 – A LATE NEOLITHIC CEMETERY

This feature was selected for excavation due to the previously unrecorded type of its superstructure which differed from those known of the Kerma period (fig. 7). It is located on the southern crest of the ridge, 115m to the north of F004. On the surface, it was marked only by a spread of small quartz rocks, measuring 11m from north to south and 8m

¹³ Petrick 2012: 119.

¹⁴ Wolf and Nowotnick 2007: 31–32.

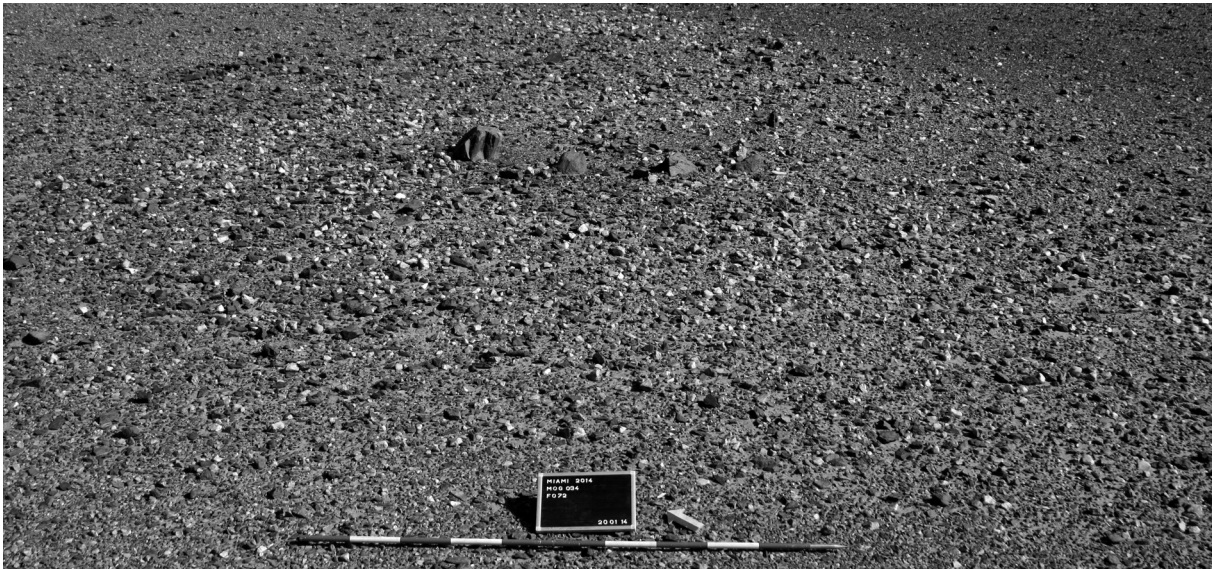


Fig. 7: F072, superstructure prior to excavation (photograph: Gareth Rees)

from east to west, and five basalt blocks, measuring up to 300mm in width, protruding from the ground surface in a semi-circle in the north-eastern quadrant. A trench, measuring 11m by 8m, including all the features in question was opened. Natural bedrock, consisting of dark grey laminated basalt, was exposed in the majority of the area. Several angular shallow pits had been excavated which contained the burials of at least three adults, five children and two infants, positioned in close proximity to each other (fig. 8).¹⁵ Two of the adults had been repositioned or reburied in a quite remarkable way.¹⁶ Furthermore five deceased of unknown age as well as two sheep/goats were inhumed here. Many of the graves were interconnected, but no grave appeared to disturb the remains in another. There was a large amount of disturbance in this cemetery which appeared to have occurred in antiquity and was targeted on specific burials.

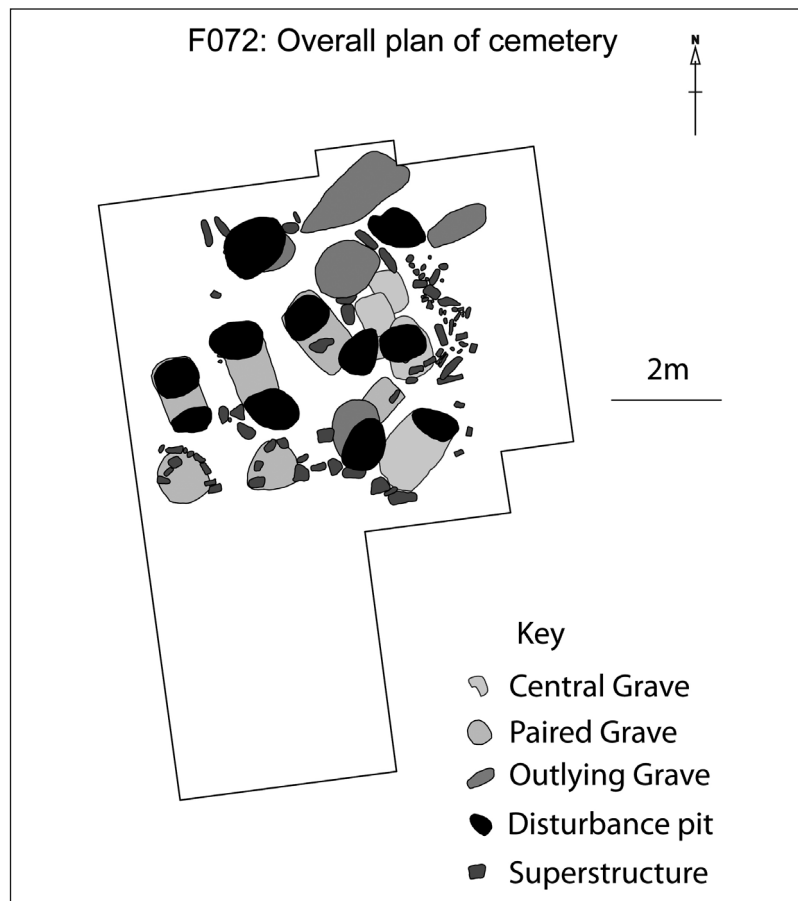


Fig. 8: F072, plan of the cemetery showing feature groups (photograph: Gareth Rees)

15 Several contexts within the excavation area remained unexcavated at the end of the season due to time constraints, but will be completed in the autumn season in 2014.

16 As the analysis of the anthropological findings has not yet been concluded, details of these contexts will have to wait for a future publication.

The first activity appears to have been a group of five central graves, four of which were inter-connected, that were sealed by a fine silt into which the five large stone uprights were set. A group of six graves, which appear to have been positioned in pairs of an adult and a child, were then excavated adjacent to the



Fig. 9: F072, child burial (SK13) with shell bead necklace (photograph: Jens Weschenfelder)

central graves. Five later and outlying graves, including that of a goat, formed no discernible pattern but their location clearly referenced that of the earlier burials. After it went out of use the small cemetery was covered by a layer of aeolian sand and later the distinguishable quartz capping on the recent surface.

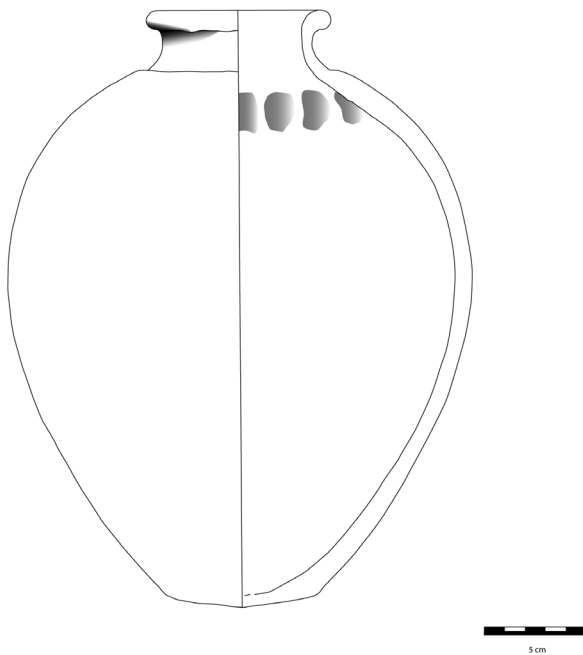


Fig. 10: Marl clay jar from F072 (drawing: Jens Weschenfelder)

Remains of grave goods have been found, interestingly with a particular concentration in the burials of the children (fig. 9). These include a substantial number of personal goods like beads of stone, shell, molluscs and faience or malachite as well as other items like a mica mirror, organic objects and a small copper alloy object. In terms of pottery, a single miniature ceramic vessel was found close to the remains of a child. In contrast, a huge amount of pottery was recovered from the top of the grave fills, probably cast up by the later disturbance, or close to quartz cappings which may represent individual grave superstructures. Not a single vessel was intact, but a few could be completely reconstructed. A first analysis of the pottery suggests a late Neolithic/Prekerma (3100–2450 BC) to Ancient Kerma (2450–1950 BC) date. A big marl clay jar (fig. 10) doubtlessly represents an import from Egypt and is of highest interest for reconsidering the integration of the region in the wider exchange networks during the period under discussion. The vessel may date to the end of the early dynastic period up to the early Old Kingdom.¹⁷

¹⁷ Thanks to Dietrich Raue and Pamela Rose, who had a brief look at the drawing and the photograph of the object. The jar is quite similar to a specimen (no. 51) from Giza tomb G1821, dating to the 4th dynasty (Hawass and Senussi 2008: 114), but with a flat narrow bottom possibly pointing to an earlier period (Wodzińska 2011: XXX).



Three C14 dates obtained from charcoal samples from the fillings of several grave pits point to the end of the 4th or the beginning of the 3rd Millennium BC for the occupation of F072:

- Poz-63315: 4330 ± 35 BP
 68.2% probability
 3011BC (22.9%) 2978BC
 2960BC (4.3%) 2952BC
 2942BC (41.1%) 2898BC
 95.4% probability
 3078BC (0.6%) 3074BC
 3024BC (94.8%) 2890BC
- Poz-63316: 4385 ± 30 BP
 68.2% probability
 3023BC (68.2%) 2928BC
 95.4% probability
 3091BC (95.4%) 2916BC
- Poz-63317: 4360 ± 35 BP
 68.2% probability
 3012BC (68.2%) 2918BC
 95.4% probability
 3089BC (8.9%) 3054BC
 3031BC (86.5%) 2901BC.

In all, F072 seems to represent a Late Neolithic cemetery. Burial grounds of this period are rare in the region between the 4th and 5th Cataracts.¹⁸ That excavated and presented here is currently without comparison. This feature is indicative of the need to test typologies and dating, ascribed during field surveys, through detailed excavation and C14 dating from well stratified deposits.

PERSPECTIVE

Site MOG034 reveals a unique opportunity to document a late Neolithic as well a Kerma cemetery in one site and hence produce seminal data on the transition between the two periods in the study region. In light of the findings of the first season, future campaigns will aim to further excavate and characterise the variety of grave types present on MOG034 and to establish its complete occupational history. Furthermore, the analysis of the skeletal as well as the organic remains, small finds, pottery and metal finds will be advanced so dating and further detailed information of each burial will be available. Finally, in the autumn season 2014 a comprehensive survey of Kerma cemeteries of Mograt Island is planned.

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18 Budka 2007: 63; Wolf and Nowotnick 2005: 186.



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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die erste Kampagne der Mograt Island Archaeological Mission (MIAMi) auf dem kermazeitlichen Friedhof MOG034 verfolgte innerhalb einer zweimonatigen Grabungssaison 2014 zwei Hauptziele. Zum einen wurde das Gesamtareal, ein Hügelkamm etwa einen Kilometer südöstlich des Dorfes Karmel, begangen und 106 Oberflächenstrukturen für die weitere Bearbeitung dokumentiert. Außerdem fand eine komplette digitale Erfassung des Fundplatzes mit allen oberflächlich sichtbaren Strukturen statt. Der zweite Teil der Kampagne konzentrierte sich auf die Ausgrabung einer Grabgruppe im Südosten

des Hügelkamms sowie von vier Einzelstrukturen, verteilt über den Süden des Grabungsareales. Die südliche Gruppe umfasste fünf Grabanlagen mit Oberbauten; alle Bestattungen waren beraubt. Die morphologischen Merkmale aller Gräber wurden jedoch im Detail erfasst, um Hinweise für ihre Datierung sowie Daten für regionale und überregionale Vergleiche zu gewinnen. Drei weitere Anlagen wiesen keinerlei Struktur unterhalb des Oberbaus auf und können nur unter Vorbehalt als Markierungen oder rituelle Plätze gedeutet werden. Eine lediglich von kleinen Quarzkieseln bedeckte Fläche erwies sich als eigenständiger Friedhof mit 17 partiell ungestörten Bestattungen, die neben 15 Kindern, Erwachsenen und Individuen unbekanntes Alter auch zwei Schafe/Ziegen umfassten. Nach einer ersten Analyse der keramischen Funde sowie auf der Grundlage mehrerer ¹⁴C-Daten aus Füllungen einzelner Grabgruben ist dieser Friedhof vermutlich in das Spätneolithikum einzuordnen. In den folgenden Kampagnen soll die systematische Untersuchung des Fundplatzes fortgesetzt werden. Ebenso ist für die Herbstkampagne 2014 ein Survey zur Dokumentation weiterer kermazeitlicher Friedhöfe auf der Insel Mograt geplant.

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