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PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE 2022 FIELDWORK SEASON OF THE JOINT MISSION NCAM - UNIVERSITY OF ROME "LA SAPIENZA"

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The paper offers an overview of the 2022 research activities of the joint mission NCAM - University of Rome "La Sapienza". The work at the Kushite temple of Hujair Gubli is first discussed, then the results of a small survey between Zuma and Magal are presented, with the discovery of previously unknown rock-art and tumuli sites. Finally, documentation and museum activities are briefly mentioned, and the perspectives for future research are sketched out.

Keywords: Hujair Gubli; Rock art sites; Sudan; Sudanese-Italian Archaeological Mission; Temple

1. INTRODUCTION: THE JOINT ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT NCAM-SAPIENZA

The 2022 fieldwork season of the joint Sudanese-Italian project conducted by the *National Corporation for Antiquities and Museum* (NCAM) and the University of Rome "La Sapienza" in the region of the Southern Dongola Reach between Zuma and Hujair took place from 15 to 23 November 2022 (fig. 1).[1]

The project was established in 2020 within the framework of a cooperation agreement between the two institutions, under the auspices of the Italian *Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation* and with the financial support of the University of Rome "La Sapienza", in order to carry out survey, excavation, and cultural heritage management in the concession area.[2]

The focus of the project is the temple site of Hujair Gubli, some 40 km downstream from Jebel Barkal, on the right bank of the Nile, where the foundations of a monumental building had been already identified inside a private house, but only partially investigated.[3] The main goals of the season were (1) to clean the area, assessing the state of preservation of the structure, (2) to proceed with the mapping of the site and the layout of the edifice, (3) to start considering possible strategies of conservation. Unfortunately, an unexpected bureaucratic issue first delayed and then precluded full access to the location, and the originally planned work had to be significantly modified. The incident resulted in a complete rescheduling of the agenda and, in the end, of a substantial shortening of the research programme.

Nonetheless, thanks to the collaboration of the Sudanese colleagues, it was possible to rearrange the research programme as follows: (1) fieldwork activities in the concession area included (a) a limited test excavation in the temple area and (b) a small survey between

[1] The team included: Paola Buzi (Italian director, University of Rome "La Sapienza"), Amel Hassan Gismallah (Sudanese co-director, NCAM), Angelo Colonna (vice-director, Pisa University), Julian Bogdani (topographer, University of Rome "La Sapienza"), Paolo Rosati (archaeologist, University of Rome "La Sapienza"). NCAM inspector Yassin Ibrahim Sidahmed, joined the group at a later stage. The headquarters and house of the 2022 season were established in Zuma.

[2] Buzi - Colonna 2022. The basic reference study on the region is Żurawski 2003. The toponym is also found spelled as Hugair, Hugeir or Hujayr.

[3] Żurawski 2001, 283-289; 2003, 358-359; Bushara Mohamed *et al.* 2014.

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Zuma and Magal, which led to identification of a previously unrecorded rock-art area in the desert outskirts west of the town of Magal; (2) documentation activities at the Jebel Barkal Museum in Karima.

2. The temple site at Hujair gubli

As for the current situation of the site, a first consideration regards the terraced dyke that had been built in front of the house to defend it from the high flood in 1998.[4] Looking at the aerial photographs, the area clearly appears to have been enlarged since that time, a fact which suggests a significant interference (fig. 2a-b).

Therefore, since it was not possible to enter the house, it was decided to investigate this sector, where a visible alignment of sandstone could indicate either the remains of some foundation blocks or a regularised course in the bedrock. A small trench (3 × 2 m) was thus opened at the southern end of such alignment, ca. 3-4 m north of the entrance door and 1,5-2 m from the external wall, running roughly NE-SW (fig. 3). The removed debris was rather incoherent and not compacted, consisting of sand mixed with sandstone heaps. Just below the superficial layer, the bedrock was immediately reached showing a roughly rectangular depression on the south side of the trench which seemingly marked the placing of a block. The presence of sandstone heaps and the irregular profile of the bedrock might indicate the collapse and the spoliation of the original walls. No findings were recovered.

The plan to expand the trench both north, following the alignment of the bedrock, and west, toward the house external wall, in order to expose the remains of the temple front, had to be stopped due to the persisting circumstances.

Nonetheless, a drone flight was carried out over the private house and its immediate surroundings, so as to have at least a grasp of the situation inside. Indeed, given the modern activities conducted in the courtyard (storing of palm dates), not much of the temple foundations could be recognised by drone. Still an attempt has been made to produce a provisional and updated map of the whole sector, georeferencing the sketched plan of the Polish mission and adding some newly identified elements like a column base seen on the ground in 2020 and still visible from above, but apparently not drawn by the Polish.[5]

This general plan (fig. 4) gives us an idea of both the distribution of the recorded features and of the possible original scale of the edifice, and allows proposing some notes about the type, dating, and cult of the temple. In this regard, as a preliminary working hypothesis it might be suggested that it belongs in the class of Multi-room temples (according to Caroline Rocheleau's typology) with basic plan (pylon + columned hall / antechamber / inner tripartite sanctuary), for which the Napatan complex of Soniyat, located further downstream, offers a broad term of comparison.[6] Accordingly, the documented foundation blocks would fit one of the inner chambers of the sanctuary, while the scattered column bases would be part of the temple columned hall (fig. 5).

[4] Żurawski 2003, 358.

[5] Żurawski 2003, 359, figs. 2-3.

[6] Żurawski 2003, 243-249; Rocheleau 2008, 69, fig. 20, tab. 3. Given the limited evidence of layout of the Hujair temple, however, Rocheleau does not explicitly include this building in her typological categorisation.

Another interesting element that can be added to the discussion is the suggestion proposed by Bogdan Żurawski to identify the complex of Hujair with the temple of Amun in Tara-on-ensi mentioned on the stela of king Harsyhotef as part of a royal journey that also touched the temple of Bastet of Tare, which he equates with the smaller but better preserved edifice at Usli, situated just across the Nile opposite Hujair.[7] The hypothesis is remarkable for two reasons: (1) it interprets the titular god of the sacred building as Amun - which would be consistent with the temple type sketched above; (2) it would imply an earlier architectural phase dating to the first half of the 4th century BCE.

Of course, all the foregoing remarks remain an educated guess that needs to be tested on the ground. Also, the comparison with Soniyat is purely indicative of a possible architectural type, while the scale of the extant remains at Hujair Gubli points at a larger and more monumental impact.

3. The survey and the identification of a new rock-art site

The rescheduled focus of the season concerned a short survey between Zuma and Magal, where some reported sites of interest were visited and recorded. The survey was conducted by foot and integrated by drone flights, but, in most cases, it was not possible to produce a positive assessment of the information received, with few exceptions.

The major result in this regard was the identification of previously unrecorded archaeological sites in the desert plateau outside the modern village of Magal (fig. 1). While so far unknown, they all show clear traces of heavy looting and disturbance due to modern gold mining activities, as it was confirmed by the account of inspector Yassin Ibrahim Sidahmed. The types of sites located, registered by GPS, photographed, and described include two rock-art localities and a tumuli field.

Magal Desert 1 is a low elongated outcrop roughly oriented NNW-SSE, with a flat top decreasing toward SE, characterised by a number of features scattered along its north-western slopes. Overall, eleven points of interests (POI) were identified and mapped, each one of them consisting of a small clusters of rock engravings that include petroglyphs, graffiti and so-called rock-gongs (fig. 6).

The repertoire of drawings encompasses three broad groups of motifs, mostly executed by incising and pecking the sandstone surface (tab. 1):

1. Boats (fig. 7): (a) sickle-shaped boat with cabin and triangular steering oar; (b) boat with triangular steering oar, central mast and sail; (c) boat with curved hull and oars (?).
2. Animals: bovines and gazelles (?) (fig. 8).
3. Schematic signs and symbols that might be possibly interpreted as *wusum* signs, "tribal markers" or cattle brands of some kind (fig. 9).[8]

[7] Żurawski 2001, 285-286. For the relevant passage of the stela, see Eide *et al*. 1996, 443 (78), ll. 21-24.

[8] Cf. Karberg 2005; Kleinitz 2007, 225-226; 2012, 44. The motifs at Magal Desert 1 do not show straightforward resemblance with those discussed by those authors but in one case (POI 1) it recurs on the foreleg of a bovine, which suggest a similar context of meaning.

Their dating raises some difficulties as the pictures might have been engraved in different times and, on the other hand, they can hardly be assigned to a specific period with certainty, so their stylistic traits and chronological position require further study. In this regard, it might be preliminarily noted that the absence of camels possibly has a chronological value, since they are characteristic of a later horizon from the mid-1st millennium ca.[9] The animal imagery is also likely to reflect the symbolic and economic interests of the local groups. As for the boats, sickle-shaped types with central cabin and triangular steering oar as well as vessels with central mast, sails and riggings are attested from the New Kingdom times onwards - though the classification of this motif remains a matter of debate.[10]

In addition to figurative and symbolic drawings, a series of vertical incised marks and a dense area of cup-shaped depressions were found (POI 4). The first can be tentatively interpreted as tally marks signalling the days spent in the place by groups frequenting the place; the second is possibly an example of "rock-gongs", i.e. natural boulders or slabs used to produce sound by striking repeatedly the rock surface with small stones or pebbles (fig. 10). The term is conventional and designates a characteristic but differently articulated phenomenon of acoustic exploitation at rock art sites that is well-attested in Africa, and has been variously reported from several localities of the Sudanese Nile valley between the Third and the Sixth Cataracts, with a recent focus on the region of the Fourth Cataract.[11] Alternatively, the seemingly geometrical arrangement of the cupules, aligned in an eight-shaped pattern on the horizontal rock panel, could be indicative of a use as a game board. Interpreting the meaning of cup-marks is a complicated matter and the above-mentioned hypotheses do not exhaust the range of potential explanations.[12] Be that as it may, both types of evidence illustrate a variegated perception and a multifaceted exploitation of the local landscape, which invites to set rock art against its broader lived context.

Magal Desert 2 is a tumuli field with stone rings of circular and oval shape, which was identified on the desert plateau lying few hundred meters west of Magal Desert 1. The site appears as a sandy plain covered with scattered pebbles and large rocky flakes of ferruginous sandstone. Five tumuli (labelled with progressive number: 1-4, 7) of different size were recorded and drone mapped, all of them being heavily disturbed and robbed out: their core mounds have been completely destroyed and only the external rings preserve traces of the original layout (fig. 11). Unidentified bone fragments were visibly scattered in the nucleus of Tumulus 3, while very few non-diagnostic sherds were recovered from the surface of Tumulus 5, together with a spherical groundstone/percussion tool. The substantial lack of pottery or any datable find makes it difficult to propose a precise dating for this kind of structures, which recur frequently in the region spanning from Kerma to post-Meroitic and Medieval times. While their chronological understanding remains

9 Kleinitz 2007, 217-218.

10 In general, triangular steering oars, central mast, sails and riggings are usually markers indicating at least a New Kingdom date; cf. Červíček 1986, 83-84 (Horizons C, D).

11 See in general Fagg 1997. For discussion on Sudanese evidence, especially in the area of the Fourth Cataract, see Kleinitz 2004; 2007.

12 An overview in Bednarik 2010.

uncertain, their position and relationship within the local landscape should also be addressed more in detail.

Magal Desert 3 is another rock art site that was identified on a small rocky hilltop further to the west of Magal Desert 1. Few individual rock drawings were recorded on the top of the mound, with incised motifs that resemble in part those attested at Magal Desert 1 (tab. 1). Two isolated tumuli (5, 6), similar to those spotted at Magal Desert 2 and likewise robbed, were located not far from the mentioned hilltop.

Overall, the discovery of rock art localities and tumuli compares with the evidence from the upstream region at the Fourth Cataract, where they both represent common types of sites extensively recorded by earlier salvage projects, attesting the long-term frequentation of these landscapes.[13] At the same time, it enriches the picture for the region of the Southern Dongola Reach, especially regarding rock art data.

MOTIF TYPE		MD 1											MD 3
		POI1	POI2	POI3	POI4	POI5	POI6	POI7	POI8	POI9	POI10	POI11	
Symbols	Cattle marks	4			2		1	1	2	6		1	1
	Various/Undefined	~ 1	1			2					1		9
	Tally marks				3								2
Animals	Cattle	1	~ 3										
	Bovine + cattle brand	1											
	Bovine with calf				1								
	Gazelle (?)			1	1		1						
Boats	Cabin + steering oar		1										
	Central mast + sail		1										
	Curved hull + oars		1										

Tab. 1 - Recorded rock art motifs at Magal Desert (MD) 1 and 3.

4. DOCUMENTATION ACTIVITY AT THE JEBEL BARKAL MUSEUM IN KARIMA

Fieldwork activities were complemented by an inspection at the storerooms of the Jebel Barkal Museum in Karima, where relief fragments belonging to the decoration of the Hujair temple that have been kept since their recovery by the Sudanese colleagues. Of the two sandstone blocks there located and identified by a simple shelf mark, only the best preserved one (B-3-3), inscribed with the cartouche of king Aktisanes (end of the 4th century BCE) has been briefly published (fig. 12).[14] The second fragment (B-4-1) is more damaged but shows clear traces of reddish-orange painting; its decoration is not immediately apparent, though part of a disc (?) can possibly be distinguished. High

[13] See, among the others, the systematic work done by the *Sudan Archaeological Research Society* (SARS) and the *Humboldt University Nubian Expedition* (H.U.N.E.) A general overview on these and other institution's surveys activities in the region is given by Drzewiecki - Cedro 2019, 992-1001, with references to individual projects and their reports. For informed discussion on the rock art evidence from the SARS and H.U.N.E. concessions, see Kleinitz 2004; 2007; 2012.

[14] Bushara Mohamed *et al.* 2014, 27, fig. 5.

resolution images were thus acquired for documentation as well as for generating 3D models of the objects for future study purposes.

5. Conclusions

Despite the unexpected complications, the 2022 season of the NCAM-Sapienza joint project has yielded some new though limited pieces of information on the archaeological record of the area.

The limited investigation at the temple of Hujair has resulted in a preliminary georeferenced plan of the building's remains, based on earlier documentation, and has stimulated reflection on the typology and dedication of the temple. The hypotheses await direct confirmation from the field, especially with regard to a more precise assessment of the temple's historical *milieu*; the previously established goals of excavation and topographical analysis of the site can only be reaffirmed as the major avenues of future research for better understanding the cultural and environmental history of the region.

The reconnaissance carried out in the rocky desert plain outside the modern village of Magal, on the other hand, has produced new and positive evidence of tumulus cemeteries and rock art concentration in the region, envisaging a novel line of exploration. In this regard, key goals will include: (1) assessing typology, chronology, and cultural significance of the petroglyphs; (2) analysing the distribution of such features (both visual and non-visual) in their mutual relationships (association of the hypothetical "rock-gongs" with cattle depiction?) as well as in the context of the surrounding landscape, its perception and exploitation (regional tracks and caravan routes); (3) extending the reconnaissance, also to check reported information about further points of interest in the region.

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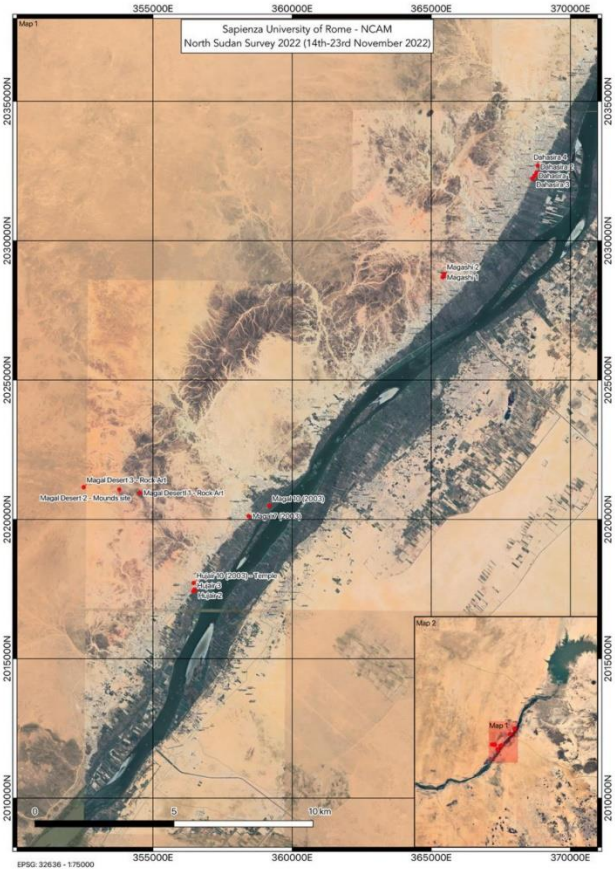

Fig.1 - General map of the surveyed area with sites and points of interest.

Fig. 2a-b - Aerial view of the temple site at Hujair showing the enlarged dyke built in front of the modern house.

Fig. 3 - Test excavation in front of the modern house seen from East.

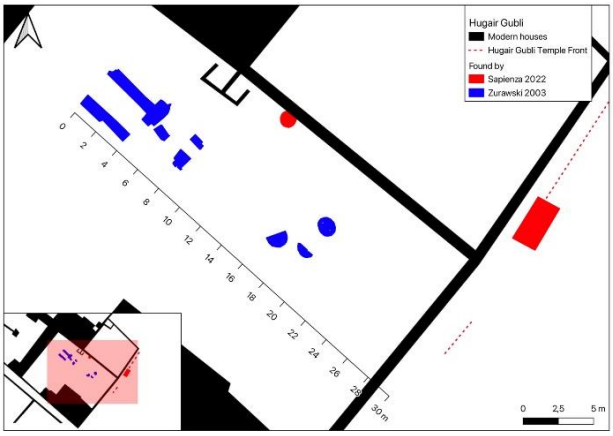

Fig. 4 - Plan of the main recorded temple features (elaboration by P. Rosati).

Fig. 5 - Aerial view of the temple remains excavated by the Polish mission (after Żurawski 2001, fig. 1).

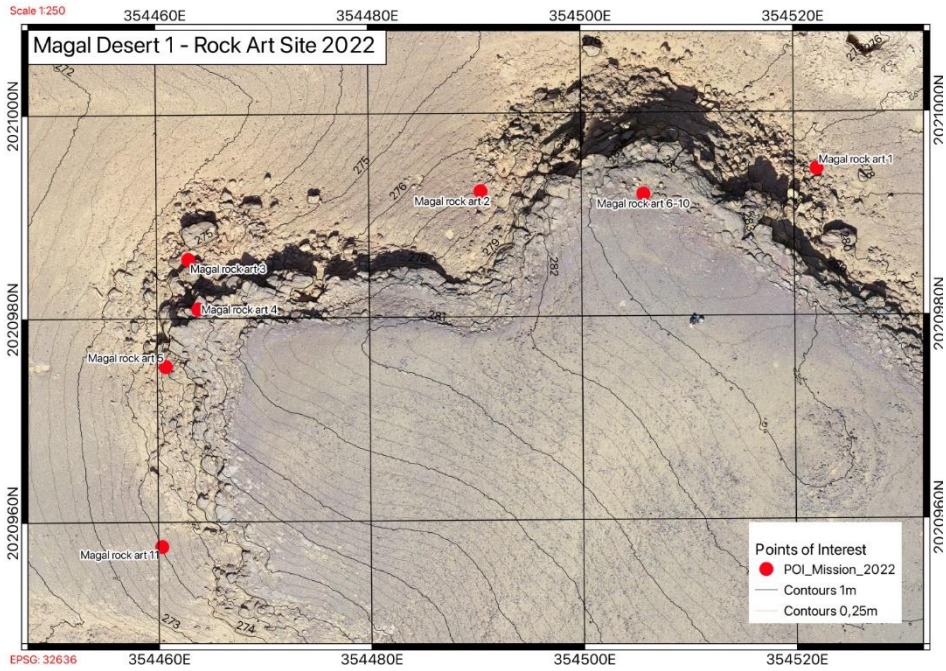

Fig. 6 - Orthophoto of Magal Desert 1 with marked clusters of petroglyphs (elaboration by P. Rosati).

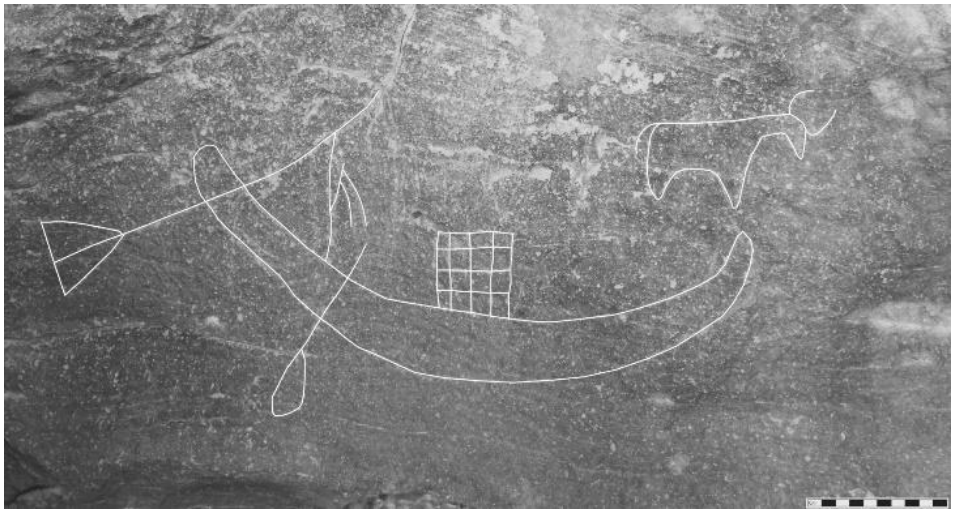

Fig. 7 - Boat with central cabin and triangular steering oar (POI 2).

Fig. 8 - Incised bovine mark (POI 2).

Fig. 9 - Possible *wusum* sign/cattle mark associated with quadruped (POI 9).

Fig. 10 - Rock cupules associated with cattle images and marks (POI 4).

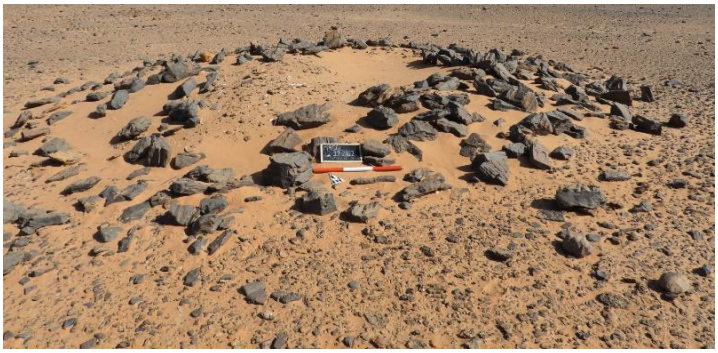

Fig. 11 - Magal Desert 2, Tumulus 3.

Fig. 12 - Sandstone block with relief decoration (B-4-1) from the Jebel Barkal Museum at Karima.