

The Discovery of Ezana's Capital in the Heartland of ancient Meroe

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Introduction :

The question as to how and why did the rule of Meroe end is a major theme in the department of archaeological field project of the northern environs of the Royal City. The project is part of a research project entitled 'The Archaeology of Greater Meroe', which I launched in 2003 (Figure 1).

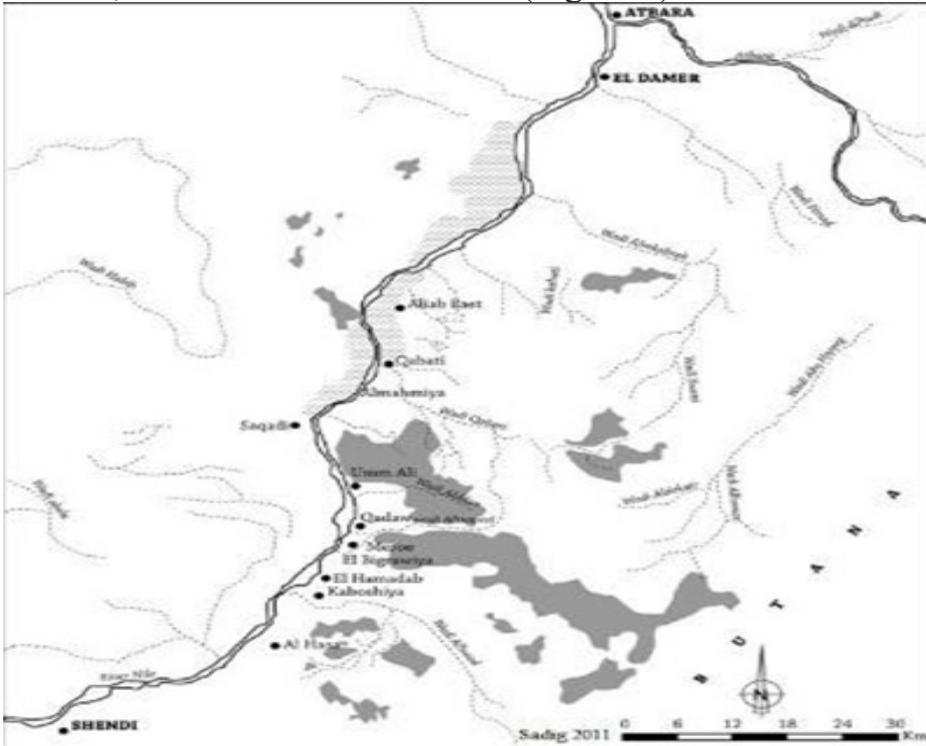


Figure (1): Map, Greater Meroe

Our first field season was in 2003. It took us two seasons (2003-2005) to formulate the major themes of the field project, during which we reviewed the known literature on the archaeology of Meroe, and revisited the numbered sites outside the fenced part of the Royal City. We believed that these sites were part of the city and that they should have been included to it; especially site 621, 622, and the totality of Al-Deragab village. The objective was to obtain a better understanding of the Royal City and to define its different quarters (Osman 2008, 2009, 2013).

By 2005, we had recorded and surveyed the sites between the Royal City and the known site of Gadau. These were mostly Neolithic sites. The question as to how and when Meroe began to become an urban centre is another major theme of the project, so we decided to carry out test excavations on one of the sites, and selected that of Al-Sour and commenced excavating in 2005 (Sadig, 2005). Concurrently we continued the survey programme, which was completed the same year (Figure 2).



Figure (2): Satellite image the northern regions of Ancient Meroe

Meroe and Axum :

As most of the Meroitic sites in its heartland seem to be intact, with only minor destruction, which can be attributed to factors other than wars, I thought the end of Meroe was a process of transformation and cultural change, rather than a sudden and dramatic end. That led me to re-read the early texts on the subject, especially those concerned with Axum and its alleged invasion(s) of Meroe. In turn, that led me to study the inscription of king Ezana to correlate my understanding of its contents with the available archaeological evidence succinctly summarized and discussed in Professor Zach's paper presented to the 2004 Meroitic Conference in Paris (Zach 2004).

It appeared to me that the events described in the inscription of Ezana are not reflected in the meagre archaeological data available. One important event claimed in his statement is "And I erected a throne at the junction of the rivers Seda and Takkaze opposite the town of Masonary, which is on this peninsula" (Kirwan 1960). The word

"opposite" in Kirwan's translation has been translated as "qubalat" by the eminent writer, ambassador and minister, Jamal Mohammed Ahmed (Alnor 2006, 523). And qubalat means: in front of and/or facing. So, Ezana's Throne or headquarters was erected somewhere north of Ancient Meroe, possibly within the limits of our concession.

In fact, we found four large and complex settlements north of Jebel Umali: one at AlDaiga, and other three at Al-Katwab. One of the settlements at Al-Katwab is primarily Meroitic, while the other two settlements and the settlement at Al-Daiga are mainly post-Meroitic/Medieval (Christian). The post-Meroitic/Medieval settlements are marked on the satellite image (Figure 2) as sites A, B, and C. Another site marked 'D' in the same satellite image is where rock art has been discovered. This paper is a preliminary report of sites A and D (Figure 3), as well as of the other major site

at AlDaiga, which is a large fortress built on the mountain range overlooking the Nile (Figure 4).



Figure (3): Satellite image of the concession area.

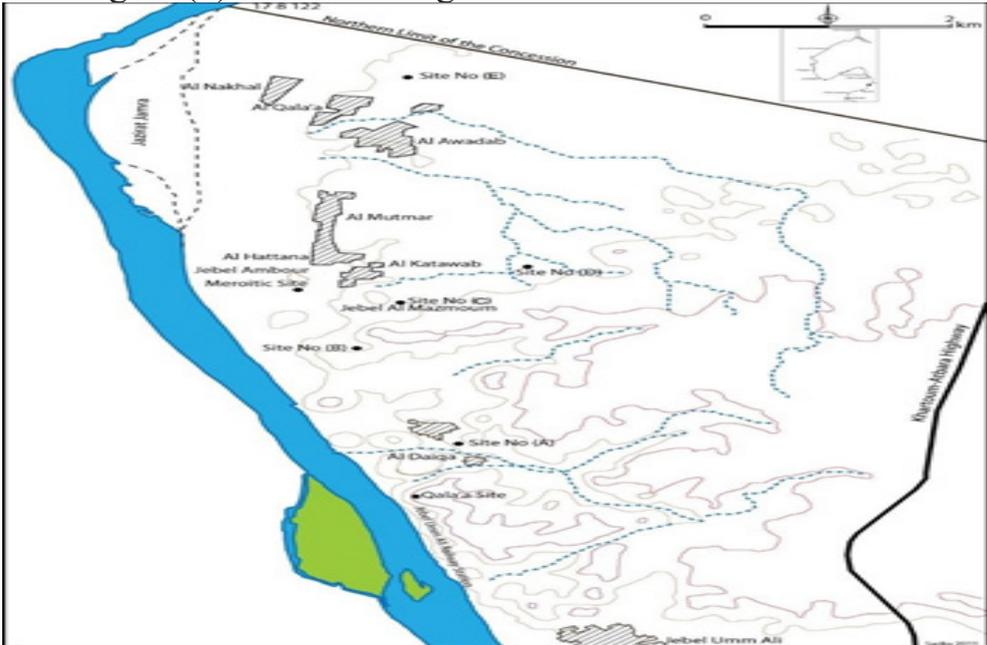


Figure (4): The concession area north of Jebel Umm Ali showing the sites discovered

The archaeology of the fortress:

The fortress is built on the Al-Daiga mountain range, overlooking the Nile from a height of about 60-65 meters (Figure 5). The hill on which it is built has a flat surface towards the east, and the fortress is built of black Nubian sandstone laid vertically and/or horizontally, cemented by mud and stone particles. Its measurements are as follows: S. Wall 23m, N. Wall 23m, W. Wall 34m, E. Wall 34m It has an L-shaped doorway on its eastern wall, which is 6m thick, with a door opening 2m wide. There are round towers on the exterior of the four corner, all connected to the outer corner walls (Figure 6).



Figure (5): Satellite image showing the Fortress.

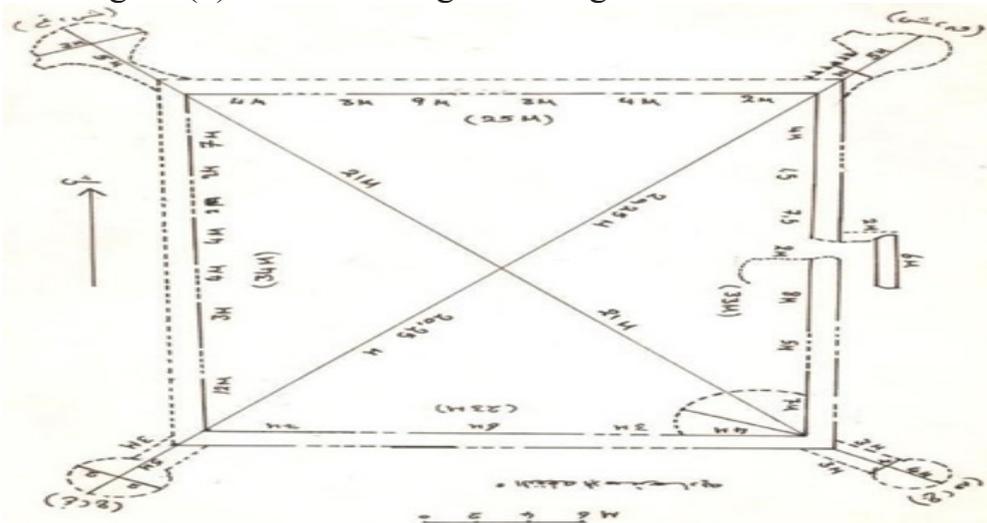


Figure (6): Sketch Plan of the Fortress

There is a deep Khor on its NE side running east. To the north are 13 crescent shaped buildings, some of them standing more than a meter, as well as a similar building to SE of the fortress. Near this building is a grave in the shape of a box, opening to the west, with a superstructure like a dome, and there are numerous other graves in the vicinity, all aligned east-west (Christian), as well as abundant sherds of hand-made red pottery (Figures 7a, b, c, d).



Figures (7a, b, c, d): General view of the Fortress.





Figure (8a, b, c and d): Details of the Fortress wall.

The archaeology of site A

Watch Towers

To the north of the hill on which the fortress is built, is another hill almost the same height. They are separated by a deep Khor (Wadi) called Al-Shigeeg, which flows west from the mountain range to the east, and which gets flooded with Nile waters during high floods. The Khor is the centre of site A. On top of this second hill are two rows of buildings, one oriented east-west and the other north-south, of which three are standing to a height of 2 meters; their shapes are circular and their circumference 6 meters. Those standing are solid platforms, which could have been watch towers (Figures 9a and b). The only evidence of the other two buildings, which could have been rooms, are the scant remains of the foundation walls.



Figure (9a, b): the watch towers.

Man-made cave

Three meters above ground level, at the base of the hill with the watch towers, what appears to be a cave has been excavated, which is about 2.5 meters deep, 3 meters high, and about 4 meters wide. At the back of the cave are many drawings. Three of these are clearly visible: a Cross of David and a knight mounted on a horse, both a repetition of what we found at site D, as well as some camels (Figures 10a, b, c).



Figure (10 a, b, c): Drawings inside the cave.

The village (Figure 11a, b and c):

To the east of the watch-towers hill on the northern bank of Khor Al- Shigeeg, is a large village of more than 20 units and other associated features. This is only one of many clusters of buildings. The village is also built of black ferric stone, and the units range in size between large, medium, and small. Associated with the village is an old well, and several graves, most of which have been plundered.



Figure (11a): Satellite image of the village.

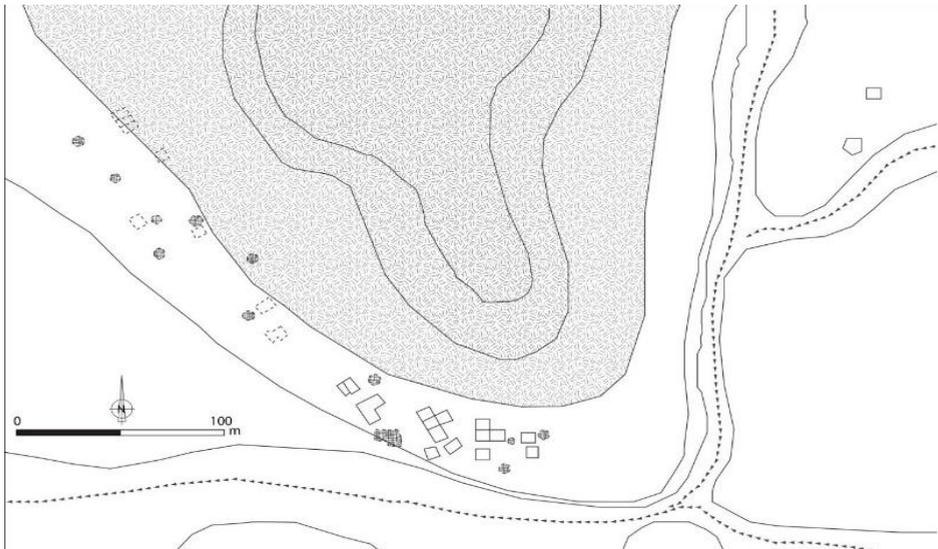


Figure (11b): Sketch map of Khor Al-shigeeg showing the village.



Figure (11c): A general view of the village taken from the hilltop from the North, with the modern village visible at the far southern end.

The units of the village are grouped as follows: units 10, 12, 13, 14 form one group, units 16, 17, 18 form a second group, units 5,6,7 form a third group, and units 20 and 21 form a fourth group. The other units are individual units, the largest being unit 11, then unit 8, followed by units 9 and 2. Units 1, 15, and 19 are circular. The largest and central group is the first group above, in which unit 13 has a column built of stone and which opens to unit 10, while unit 12 has its own opening. All the doors of this group open to the south, as do the doors of the units in all the other groups with the exception of those in group 4, the smallest, which open to the east. The second largest group, with units 16, 17, 18, also has a column in unit 17. One of the three circular units, unit 19, has a column in its centre (Figure 12a, b and c). Other general features which are in the vicinity of the groups and individual units are:

- An old well.
- Graves, some of which have been plundered.
- Other somewhat isolated units west of the main groups of buildings.



Figure (12a): Examples of columns inside the building units.



Figure (12b): Examples of columns inside the building units.



Figures (12c): Example of one of the circular building unit.





Figure (13a, b, c, d and e): Interesting features inside the walls of some of the building units.

The cemetery:

To the east of the village, on the south bank of the Khor Al-Shigeeg, is a large Christian cemetery with several complete and broken grey granite baptism water basins, as well as a large number of mostly red-coloured sherds. The bank of the Khor Al-Shigeeg, where the cemetery is located, has a steep flat surface, on which are numerous drawings of different animals, including the representations of numerous camels.



Figure (14a, b): Grave East of the fortress.

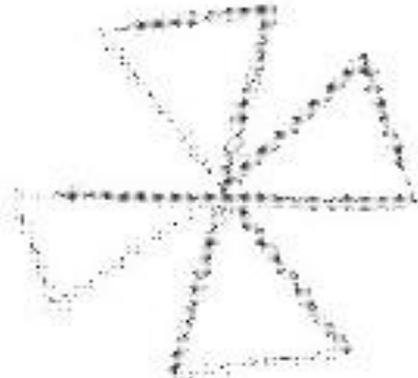
The Archaeology of site D:

This is a low hill, on which there are numerous drawings and graffiti. The hill is located at a junction of two wadis, in what looks like a delta, the north arm of which runs northeast, while the southern arm runs south-east (Figure 15). On the south side of the hill is a large enclosed area which also opens to the south.

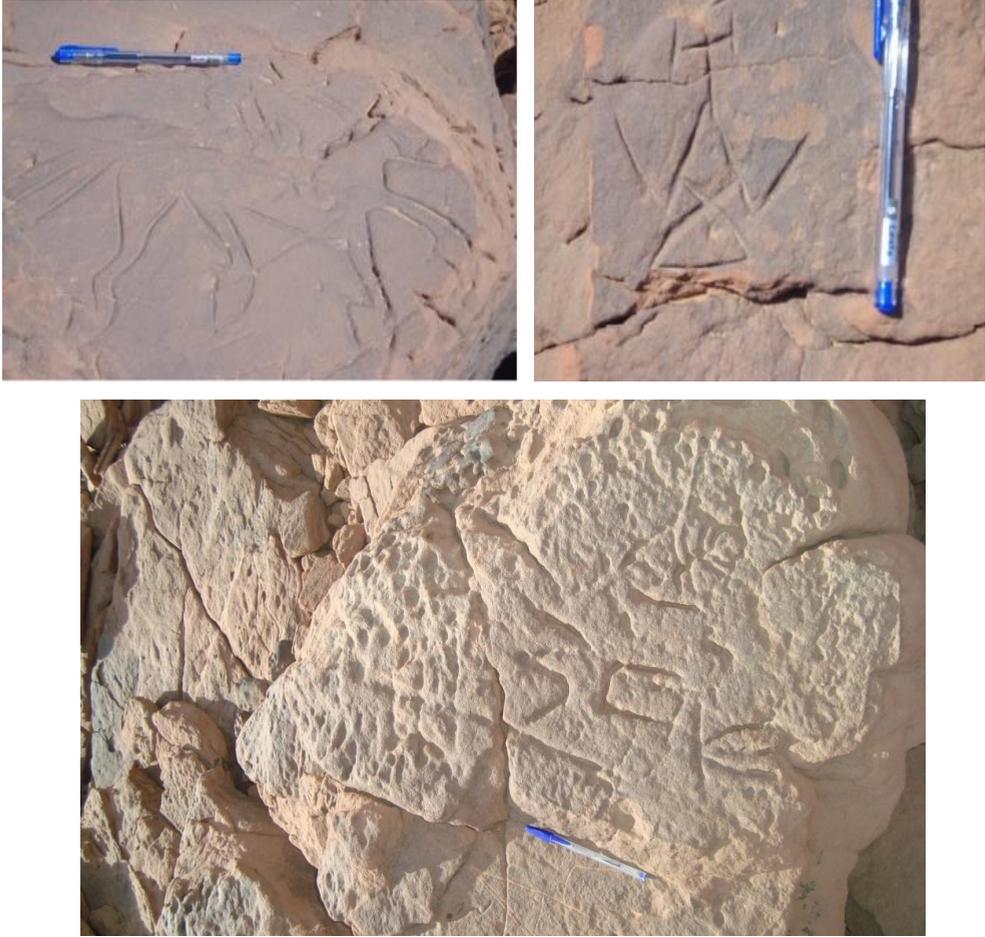


Figure (15): Satellite image of site D, and the low hill

The walls of this enclosure are piles of loose granite stones, and it appears to be a shortstay temporary shelter. Its general shape is rectangular. There is a considerable scatter of Neolithic stone implements as well as sherds of Christian-era pottery, in and around the structure. There are many stone shelters along the Wadi in which this hill is located (Figures 16a, b, c, d and e).



Figures (16a, b, c, d and e): Drawings and graffiti from the small hill of site D.



Discussion:

All the sites discussed above have produced enough evidence to warrant the whole complex to be described as a Christian settlement, whose dating is however problematic. The make-up of site A bears no resemblance to known Nubian Christian sites to the north (Nobatia and Makoria) or to the south (Alwa). On the other hand, it was easy for us to compare the fortress with other known fortresses, as far its strategic location guarding the Nile and possibly by its building material of black Nubian sandstone. It is also easy to relate it to all other sectors of site A by that same attribute, as well as by the presence of Christian graves. There are similar fortresses known along the Nile, from Garri and Jebel Um Marrihi

in the south, to as far as the First Cataract. Some authorities (Welsby 2006 and Edwards 2011) seem to suggest that they belong to a late post-Meroitic or Early Christian period.

Reading the inscription of Ezana against his known historical relations with the Romans in Egypt, who complained to him about the difficulties they were facing in their Nile trade to the south, it can be inferred that one reason for Ezana's invasion of Meroe could have been the pacification of the Nile trade route to Egypt. This fortress and similar ones could have been built under his rule. If this settlement was his alleged capital, then building the fortress must have been his first step to achieve his objectives.

To discuss these early observations with an expert of Ethiopian archaeology, I invited Dr. Alemseged Beldados (PhD), assistant professor and chair, Dept. of Archaeology and Heritage Management, Addis Ababa University, to visit the area and comment on its archaeology. He accepted the invitation and visited the area on Friday 8/11/2013. The following are his main observations:

1. He affirmed that most Early and Medieval churches in Ethiopia were built to a circular ground-plan, as was also common with traditional, vernacular house construction in Ethiopia. He also commented on the small doors of these buildings, and affirmed that they were common in Early Christian and Medieval monasteries in Ethiopia.
2. He confirmed that columns in rectangular buildings could also be associated with Christian architecture: "In Ethiopian Orthodox church construction there are three divisions/compartments separated by columns and walls. The first and the inner compartment is known as the holy of holies, which is particularly reserved for the priests; the second space is reserved for the holy low ranking priests and deacons; the third and larger part is the space where common people congregate while attending church prayers and church ceremonies. Such a tripartite division is clearly visible over a small surface area at one of the sites of Al-Daiga".
3. There are a number engravings of various shapes of crosses all over the surrounding sites at Mutmer and Al-Diaga, whose abundance can be associated with a dominant presence of Chris-

- tians in the area. Some of the engravings are of the Star of David, which is a symbol of royalty for Christian rulers of Ethiopia.
4. “We also observed engravings of a man on horseback at the two sites of Mutmar and
 5. Al-Daiga Mountain... horse riding is a sign of being a warrior in Ethiopian history”.

Conclusion:

The discovery of this large Christian settlement, dating possibly from the Early Christian period, as suggested by Dr. Alemseged Beldados above, opens up a completely new chapter in Sudan's history and Sudan's archaeology. Topics such as: the dispersal of different Nubian groups during the late Meroitic period; possible Axumite rule over Meroe before the times of king Ezana; the conversion of the Meroitic empire to Christianity; Rome's interests and activities in Nubia through their relations with the Axumites, and the origins of the Christian Nubian kingdom, become pertinent and of moment. We hope the detailed study of the archaeology of the regions of Daiga, Kotwab and Mutmar will shed more light on these questions (Figure 16).

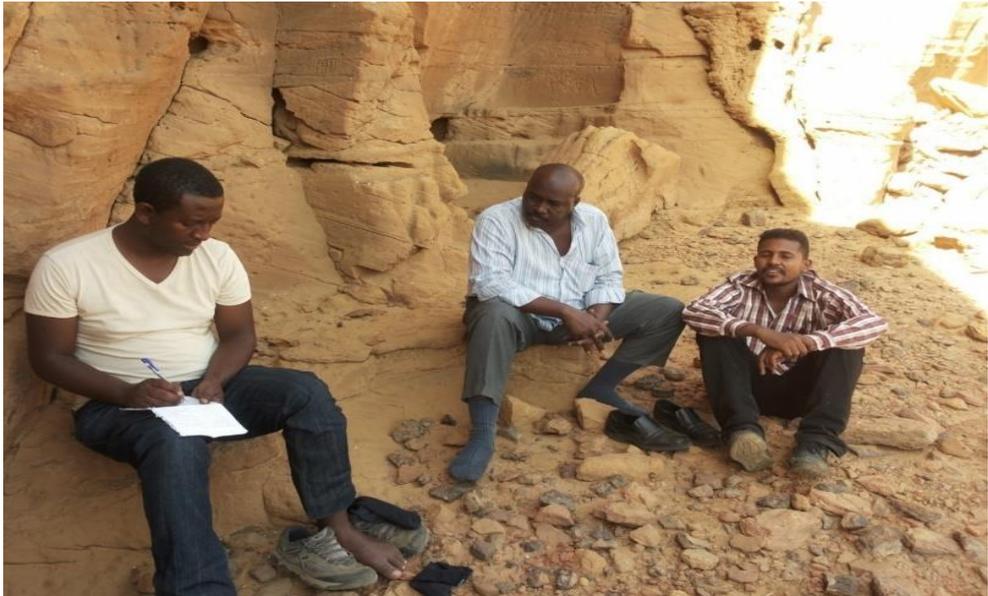


Figure (17): Dr. Alemseged Beldados and some members of the team in front of the man-made cave.

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