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## Volume 4, anno 2013

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### Indice

*Mosayyeb Amiri, Bruno Genito et alii*, Bīšāpūr and its Territory (Fars, Iran), *First Interim Report of the 2012 Archaeological Campaign*, pp. 1-45



*Irene Bragantini, Rosanna Pirelli et alii*, The Archaeological Mission of "L'Orientale" in the Central-Eastern Desert of Egypt, pp. 47-156



*Andrea D'Andrea, Kate Fernie*, 3D-Icons Metadata Schema for 3D Objects, pp. 159-181



*Bruno Genito, Giulio Maresca et alii*, Preliminary Steps Towards a WebGIS about the Italian Archaeological Activities at Dahāne-ye Gholāmān (Sistan, Iran): *ArchaeoPro.Di.Mu.S.*, pp. 183-208



*Romolo Loreto, Guillaume Charloux, et alii*, The Saudi-Italian-French Archaeological Project at Dūmat al-Jandal (*Preliminary Report of the 2012 Season*), pp. 211-251



*Andrea Manzo*, The Italian Archaeological Expedition to the Eastern Sudan of the Università degli Studi di Napoli, "L'Orientale". An Overview of the 2012 Field Season, pp. 253-271



*Fabrizio Pesando, Marco Giglio*, Indagini ad Aveia (2009-2012), pp. 273-300



*Fabiana Raiano*, Ceramics from Koj Tepa (Samarkand area - Uzbekistan): Third Interim Report (2012), pp. 303-340



*Luisa Sernicola et alii*, Archaeological Expedition at Aksum (Ethiopia) of the Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale" 2011 Field Season: *Seglamen*, pp. 343-439



[Abstracts \[italiano\]](#)

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## THE ITALIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPEDITION TO THE EASTERN SUDAN OF THE UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI NAPOLI, “L’ORIENTALE”. AN OVERVIEW OF THE 2012 FIELD SEASON

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### *Introduction*

According to the application submitted to the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums and to the research project submitted to the granting Institutions<sup>1</sup>, the goal of the 2012 field season of the Italian Archaeological Expedition to the Eastern Sudan of UNO<sup>2</sup> was the completion of the investigations at the site UA 53 and the conduction of a closer investigation of site UA 126 with the excavation of some test pits (Fig. 1).

These tasks were regarded as urgent because the two sites will be affected by the ongoing building of the new dams on the Atbara and Setit rivers and by the implementation of an agricultural scheme in the area between the Gash and the Atbara (Upper Atbara Agricultural Irrigated Scheme), which are endangering many archaeological sites of the region. As the Expedition considered it a priority to contribute to the cultural heritage management of the Kassala region, some of the endangered sites were selected for further investigations in 2010. These sites could also be significant for the research project of the Expedition which is aimed at gaining a better knowledge of the relationships between Eastern Sudan and Upper Nubia as well as to investigate the possible relationships between the

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<sup>1</sup> The field season was made possible by the economic contribution of the following institutions: Ministero Italiano degli Affari Esteri (grant 2012), UNO (research grant 2012 and contribution of the Centro Interdipartimentale di Servizi per l’Archeologia (CISA). Crucial was the support of the Poliass Marine & General insurance broker company, Naples, Italy.

<sup>2</sup> The field work took place from November 19th to December 19th. The team in the field consisted of Andrea Manzo, archaeologist, director of the project and ceramic analyst (UNO), Marco Barbarino, surface surveyor (UNO), Gilda Ferrandino, archaeologist (UNO), and Vincenzo Zoppi, archaeologist, also in charge of the survey and GIS analyst (UNO). The colleague representing NCAM was Habab Idriss Ahmed.

cultures of Eastern Sudan and the Red Sea coast *via* the Eastern Desert (Manzo 2012a; 2012b; Manzo *et alii* 2011; 2012). Both UA 53 and UA 126 were among them.

### *Investigations at Site UA 126*

UA 126 is a site located North of Kassala which was attributed to the later phases of the cultural sequence of the region according to the pottery collected on the surface in 2010 and 2011 (Hagiz Group, 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC-1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD) (Manzo *et alii* 2011, 36; 2012, 122). Also some structures, such as clusters of gravel mounds which were interpreted as funerary *tumuli*, were visible on the surface and were duly recorded. In the NCAM record of the 2010 survey the site was labeled as “Post-Meroitic”, perhaps because of the occurrence of the *tumuli*.

Three excavation units were investigated at UA 126 in 2012 (Fig. 2). Excavation unit I included a 6 m in diameter gravel mound (*Tumulus* 1) (Fig. 3), which proved to consist of an external *stratum* of gravel and an internal of gravel embedded in compact soil. Some flakes of shells and some flaked lithic were collected among the gravel of the *tumulus*. Most likely, they were already present in the gravel when it was collected to build the *tumulus*, as is also suggested by the worn surfaces of the flaked lithic. After the complete excavation of the mound, no pit was visible on the underlying surface which was characterized only by some traces of water percolation, and animal disturbances. Also a second mound North of excavation unit I (*Tumulus* 2) was investigated. *Tumulus* 2 presented apparently a recent circular pit cut into the middle. This recent pit, interpreted as a robbing effect, was emptied of the wind-blown sand *stratum* which formed after the excavation of the recent pit, but also in this case no evidence of any earlier original pit or of a funerary chamber was discovered.

Although further investigations are needed for a final interpretation of the gravel mounds at UA 126, some hypotheses can be proposed. It may be suggested that the mounds have a funerary meaning, as originally thought and as it is also suggested by inhabitants of the area, but the two mounds excavated in 2012 were cenotaphs. Possible comparisons can be suggested with some Late Meroitic/Post-Meroitic tombs without any evidence of a body and marked by *tumuli* recently investigated at Hagar El-Beida, in the Fourth Cataract area, which were nevertheless characterized by

a funerary chamber containing some grave goods (Longa 2005, 383). Therefore, as no funerary chamber was associated with the mounds of UA 126, it cannot be excluded that these mounds had a function other than the funerary. They may have been land markers, perhaps marking paths and tracks. Alternatively, they may be related to other archaeological remains recorded nearby.

Actually, North of excavation unit I and immediately West of *Tumulus 2* some concentrations of pottery and an area, with big chunks of burnt clay, were recorded. Therefore, it was decided to investigate some of these features and a second excavation unit (UA 126 II) was delimited in this area. Some areas made of harder clay were discovered in this excavation unit immediately under the soft sand. They were possibly related to light structures. In particular, a rounded feature roughly East-West oriented was partially brought to the light. Although the soil underlying the surface continues to be very sandy and soft, two possible living floors on both sides of the feature were marked by the occurrence of concentrations of horizontal potsherds as well as by the occurrence of spots with concentrations of ashy soil and charcoal flakes.

That the spot was a settlement area at some time is also confirmed by the discovery of a rounded  $1.2 \times 1$  m oval pit filled by pure clay South of excavation unit UA 126 I. This pit may have been used for clay conservation collected and depurated for ceramic production. This is also consistent with the fact that also today in the area of the site there are dry season camps of nomads inhabiting the region, i.e. the camps where it is likely that ceramic production could have taken place in the more suitable season, when rains were unlikely and the human groups could remain for a periods long enough to produce pottery at the same spot; this is an important point to be considered when dealing with nomadic potters (Eerkens 2008, 317). If this was the function of the pit filled with depurated clay, it may be suggested that the large burnt area North of excavation unit UA 126 II might have been a pottery kiln, but this hypothesis requires further investigations which will be conducted in the next field season. The clay from the pit was sampled for laboratory analysis.

The light structures and all the other features which were investigated at UA 126 I-II seem to be related to Hagiz Group (1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC-AD 1<sup>st</sup> millennium) materials, although the reoccupation of part of the site in Gergaf Group times (AD 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century) cannot be

entirely ruled out on the basis of the potsherds visible on the surface. As similar archaeological materials were also collected near the gravel mounds, the period of use of the mounds, whose function is still to be defined, may be related in some way to that of the settlement.

Finally, some 300 m North-West of the excavation units UA 126 I and II a mound was identified. On this concentrations of fragments of red bricks were found and some tombs brought to the light by the wind erosion were remarked. An excavation unit (UA 126 III) was devoted to their investigation. The mound proved to be a very densely used cemetery, whose nine graves were investigated. Interestingly, although the attitude of the bodies, in extended position on the right flank, with the right arm along the body and the left one flexed, recalls that of Muslim graves, their orientation varies from East-West to North-South, with the head to the South or to the East. No grave goods were discovered in association with the graves and even on the surface only bones from eroded graves and fragments of red bricks were collected. The use of red bricks in the superstructure of some of the graves is not related to the Muslim habits and may be compared to the structures characterizing some Christian cemeteries in Upper Nubia (Żurawski 1997, 200, 204; Welsby 2002, 58-59). Also the orientation of the body with the head to the East should not be regarded as exclusive of Muslim habits, as it is not unknown in the southern regions of Christian Nubia in Medieval times (Welsby 2002, 48-49).

The earliest tomb so far investigated is Tomb 8, in the North-Eastern corner of the excavation unit UA 126 III. This tomb was characterized by a body in extended position with an East-West orientation and the head to the East and by a red brick bench superstructure (Fig. 4). The tomb was damaged to accommodate a later tomb (Tomb 2) (Fig. 5). This suggests that this spot was used very intensively as a cemetery. Moreover, if compared to the surrounding plan the elevation of the mound where the tombs are located may be related to the accumulation of remains due to such an intense use. This will be verified in the next field season. In the meantime radiocarbon dates of samples of the collected bones should give more details on the dating of some of the graves.

### *Investigations at Site UA 53*

UA 53 is a site in the South-Western sector of the area endangered by the Upper Atbara Agricultural Irrigation Scheme. As shown by investigations conducted in 2010 and 2011, the site was characterized by the presence of eroded *tumuli* or mounds possibly dating to Jebel Mokram Group times (2<sup>nd</sup> - early 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC) in its North-Eastern sector, by the occurrence of some remains of a Jebel Mokram Group (2<sup>nd</sup> - early 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC) settlement with huts in the Northern sector of the site, by concentrations of shells originating from a Butana Group (4<sup>th</sup> - early 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC) living floor in its southern sector and by remains of a further settlement to be attributed to the Gergaf Group (15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century AD) in its central and southern sector (Manzo *et alii* 2011, 10-12; 2012, 6-21).

In 2012 it was decided to resume investigations at this site in order to gain further insights into the structures occurring in the Jebel Mokram Group settlement and to collect more data on the Butana Group artifacts related to the intensive exploitation of land snails recorded in 2011 (Fig. 6). Moreover, some explanation was greatly needed for the occurrence of lithic industries apparently related to the Butana Group in association with the Jebel Mokram Group settlement structures in the Northern sector of the site, shown by several assemblages from the excavation unit UA 53 VII in 2011 (Manzo *et alii* 2012, 85-86).

Therefore, the investigation of the excavation unit UA 53 VII, which was started in 2011, was also resumed in 2012. In the central sector of the excavation unit, the excavation continued where it stopped in 2011 from. Three concentrations of materials were discovered there, all of them lying on the top of the same soil stratum (SU 11). The first concentration (SU 7) yielded a fragment of a pottery bracelet with triangular cross-section closely related to the shape of stone bracelets discovered in Jebel Mokram Group assemblages (Sadr 1987, fig. 10; 1991, 45; Manzo *et alii* 2012, 86-87; Arkell 1954, 51-52, fig. 14). The fragment of bracelet was associated to other Jebel Mokram Group ceramic materials and to some Butana Group sherds. The second concentration, SU 9, gave materials distinctive of the Butana Group, while the third one, SU 6, gave materials distinctive of the Jebel Mokram Group and of the Butana Group. As SU 6 was located exactly in the spot where some fragments of a plastered storage pit were collected in

2011 and it also contained some fragments of plaster, some of them still *in situ*; it is highly probable that those fragments represents what remained unexcavated of the same feature, also visible on the surface before to start excavation.

The occurrence of concentrations of materials dating to different periods on the same living floor made evident by the study of these three assemblages, suggests that when the area was settled in Jebel Mokram Group times some Butana Group materials were occurring on the surface. Perhaps, when the Jebel Mokram Group people settled at UA 53, the Butana Group materials were already brought to the light by erosion. This is consistent with the intense erosion taking place after a pedogenetic phase following the Butana Group occupation which was made evident in other parts of the site in 2011 (Manzo *et alii* 2012, 8-9). This may also explain the occurrence of the living floor with an assemblage characterized by a mixture of Butana Group and Jebel Mokram Group brought to the light in 2011, which, of course, should be dated according to the age of the latest associated materials.

Moreover, the excavation unit UA 53 VII was also enlarged to the East, in order to investigate a stone feature visible on the surface close to the limit of the trench (Fig. 7). It was first thought that this stone structure could have been a *tumulus* later than the Jebel Mokram Group settlement area. When excavated the structure resulted to be a rounded stone feature, whose two courses of stones survive and whose Eastern half was badly damaged (Fig. 8). The stone structure was lying on the top of SU 3, which was shown to be a Jebel Mokram Group living floor associated with the rounded hut investigated in 2011 in the nearby excavation unit UA 53 IX (Manzo *et alii* 2012, 21).

Interestingly, the stone feature investigated in 2012 was mostly made up of reused grinding stones, a stone ax, and several potsherds which were embedded in it. Many of the materials which were reused in this feature can be attributed to the Butana Group. Therefore, as also shown by the grinding stones reused in the Jebel Mokram Group, by huts investigated in 2011 and by the occurrence of grinding stones and other reused material in the nearby *tumuli*, it might be suggested that the Jebel Mokram Group people actively looked for earlier materials useful to them (Manzo *et alii* 2012, 10, 14, 16, 21).



In the South-Eastern sector of the site a new Butana Group shell midden was investigated in 2012 in order to enlarge the sample of tools/instruments possibly related to the exploitation of land snails and to get a further sample of the shells of the exploited snails in addition to the ones recovered in excavation units UA 53 I and IV in 2011 (Manzo *et alii* 2012, 7-9, 15, 94-95). The new excavation unit was labeled UA 53 X. This mound of shells was bisected by a pit which destroyed the central part of the midden as also the living floor on the top of which the midden was lying (Fig. 9). Another pit whose function remains unknown and which was filled with stones and reused grinding stones also cuts this living floor. Apparently, this quite late pit also cuts a much earlier Butana Group pit filled with stones, whose function remains uncertain as well.

No proper investigations were conducted in 2012 in the part of the site between excavation units UA 53 VII and UA 53 X, characterized by the presence of several *tumuli*. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that an outstanding find was collected in this sector of the site, possibly originating from a robbed grave. It consists of an almost complete stone battle ax with rounded edge and double lugs to fix it in a wooden lost handle (Fig. 10). The shape of this object can be compared with finds from the site of Agordat, on the Eritrean side of the border between Sudan and Eritrea (Arkell 1954, 42, fig. 5, 14), and to objects from Upper Nubia and likely to be attributed to *Kerma classique* culture (ca. 1750-1550 BC) (Welsby ed. 2001, 380-381, fig. 7.9, 865). Moreover, the shape of this ax head is very close to that of metal Egyptian battle axes dating to the Second Intermediate Period (Petrie 1917, Pl. II, 92, Pl. VII, 147). This surface find seems to be consistent with the dating of the badly robbed *tumuli* in this part of the site to the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC and to their affiliation to the Jebel Mokram Group culture, which was proposed after the 2011 field season (Manzo *et alii* 2012, 11, 20).

### *Final Remarks*

The 2012 field season was successful and contributed to the fulfillment of the long-term goals of the project.

Actually, the excavations at UA53 conducted in 2012 gave us fresh insights into the subsistence system of the Butana Group (4<sup>th</sup> - early 3<sup>rd</sup>

millennium BC) and the organization of the settlement and domestic architecture of the Jebel Mokram Group (2<sup>nd</sup> - early 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC).

Excavations at UA 126 showed that a temporary camp of the Hagiz Group (1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC - 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD) was located there and that what was probably a storage of clay for pottery production was located nearby. Moreover, the occurrence of gravel *tumuli* whose function remains uncertain and of a possibly Christian funerary site with superstructures made of red bricks was recorded as well at UA 126. Therefore, the investigation of this site may be crucial for outlining the history of the region in Late Antique times and deserves to be continued in the 2013 field season.

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## FIGURES

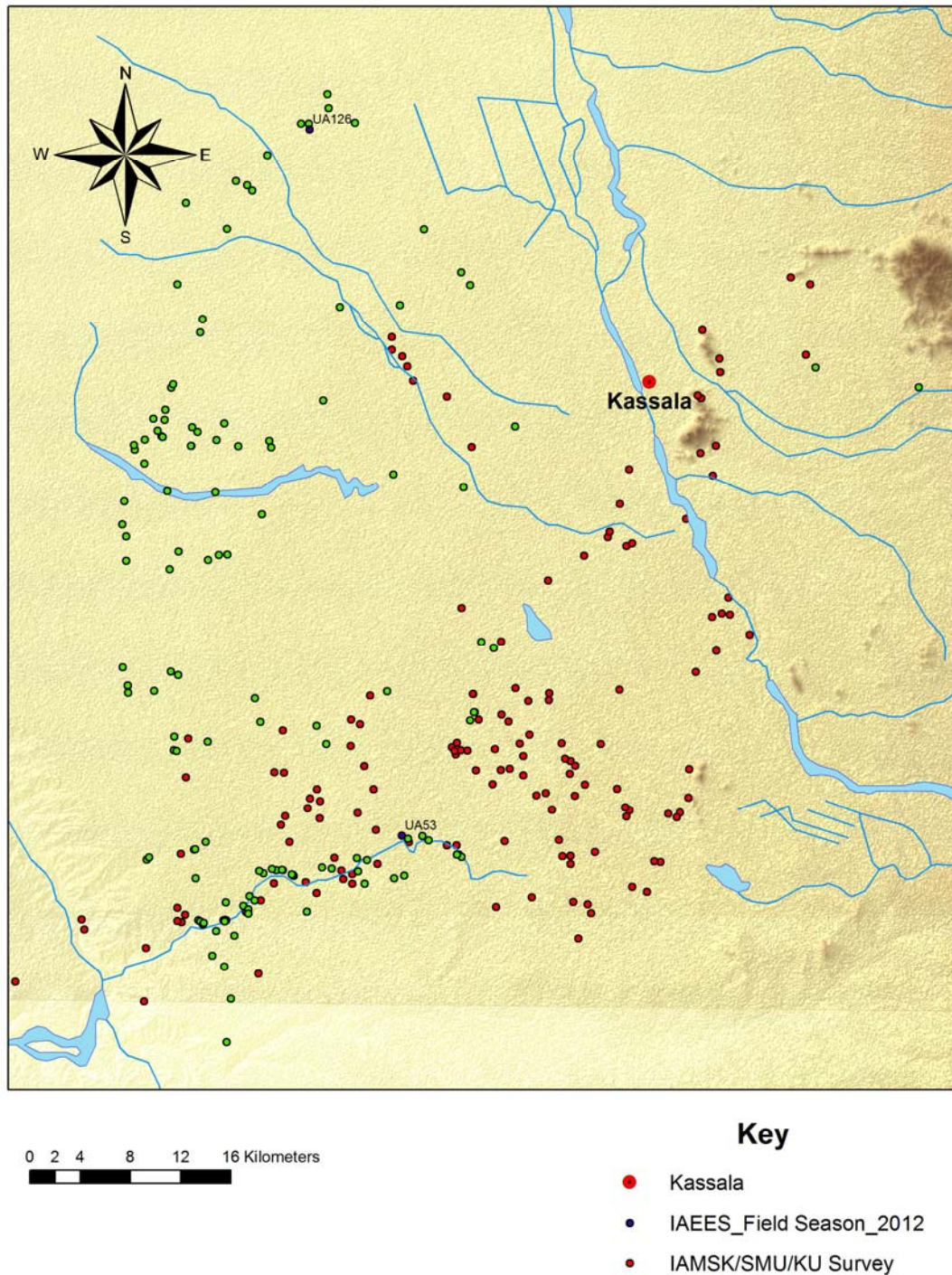


Fig. 1 - Map showing the two sites investigated in 2012, the sites investigated in the 80s by the Italian Expedition of UNO (at that time Istituto Universitario Orientale, IUO) and by the Sudanese-American Expedition of University of Khartoum and Southern Methodist University (Dallas), as well as the sites in the 2010 survey conducted by the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (GIS elaboration and map by V. Zoppi)

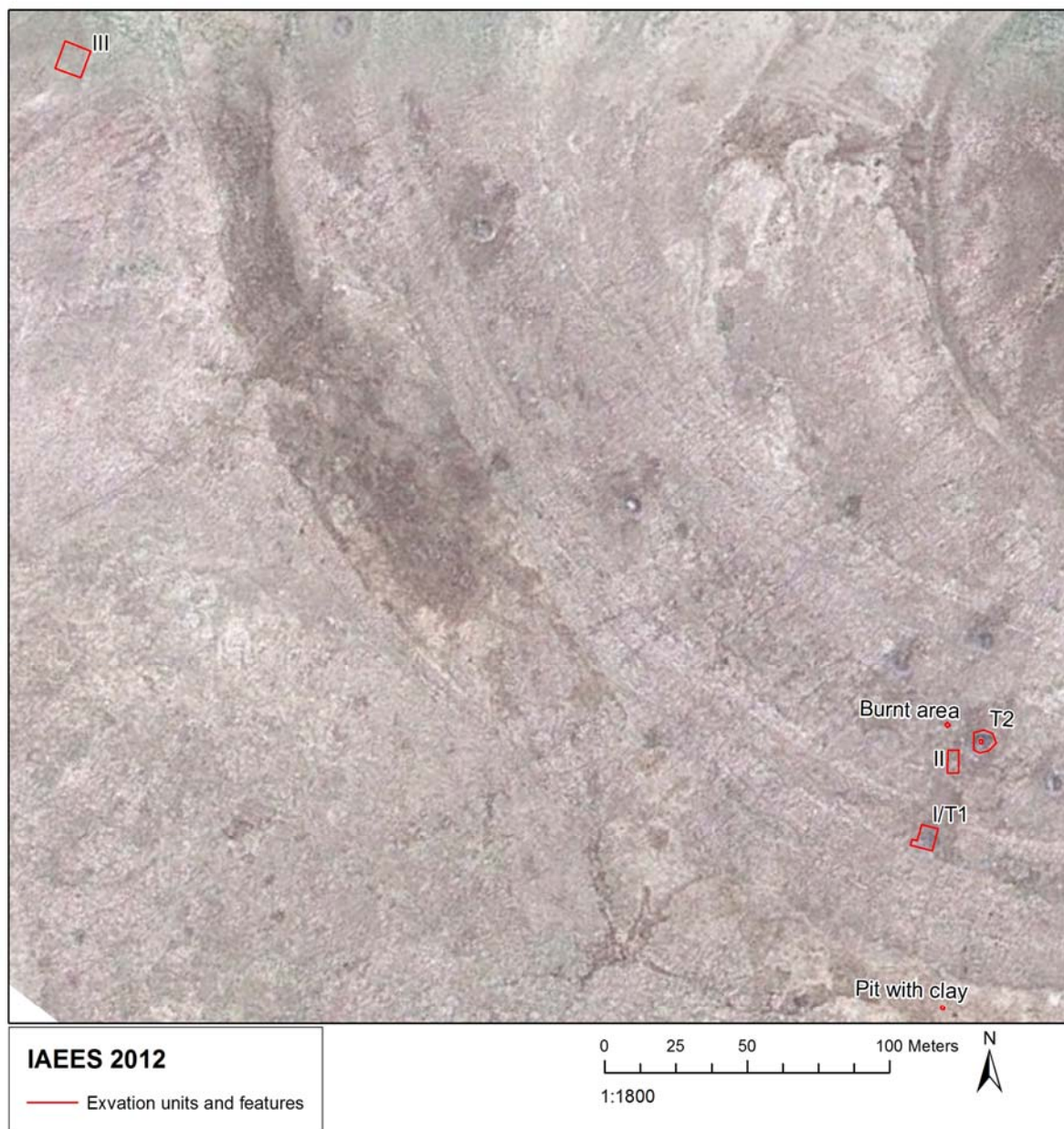


Fig. 2 - Map of site UA 126 showing the excavation units investigated in 2012 (topographic survey and map by M. Barbarino)





Fig. 3 - General view of *Tumulus* 1 before excavation



Fig. 4 - Remains of the red brick superstructure marking Tomb 8 in excavation unit UA 126 III



Fig. 5 - Damaged Tomb 2 cutting the red brick superstructure of Tomb 8 in UA 126 III

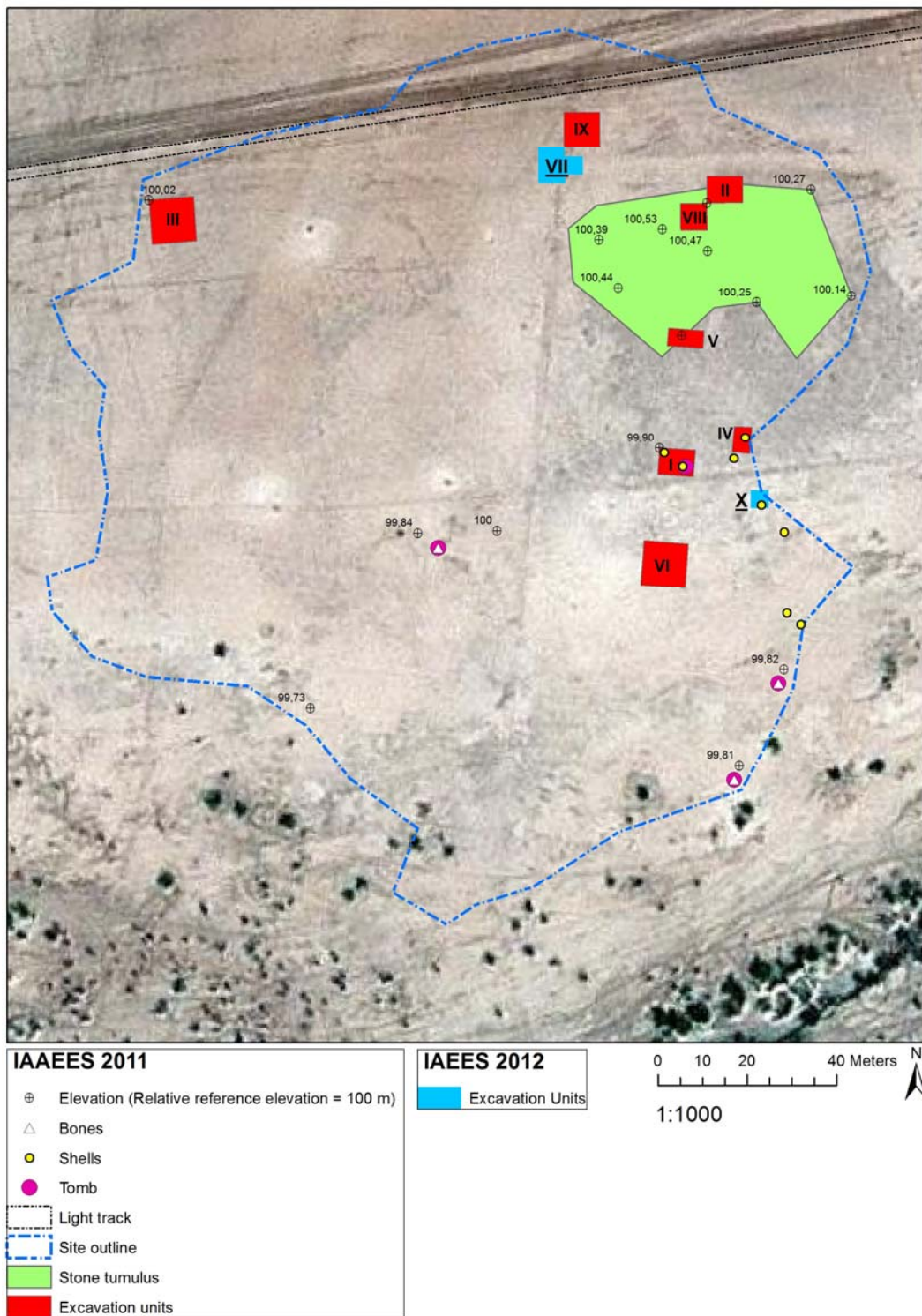


Fig. 6 - Map of site UA 53 showing the excavation units investigated in 2011 and 2012 (topographic survey and map by M. Barbarino)



Fig. 7 - Stone feature visible on the surface East of excavation unit UA 53 VII before excavation



Fig. 8 - Partial excavation of the lower course of stones of the rounded stone feature East of excavation Unit UA 53 VII, to be remarked the grinding stones reused in the structure



Fig. 9 - Shell midden in excavation unit UA 53 X, to be noted the rounded pit cutting the middle of the feature



Fig. 10 - Battle ax with rounded edge and double lugs to fix it in a wooden handle from the concentration of tumuli at UA 53