

ITALIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPEDITION TO THE EASTERN SUDAN OF THE UNIVERSITÀ DI NAPOLI "L'ORIENTALE" AND ISMEO. PRELIMINARY REPORT OF THE 2016 FIELD SEASON

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*Introduction*

The research activities conducted in the 2016 field season by the Italian Archaeological Expedition to the Eastern Sudan of the University of Naples "L'Orientale"<sup>1</sup> consisted of the continuation of the investigations at site K 1 (Mahal Teglinos), one of the major archaeological sites of the region already investigated by the archaeological expedition led by Rodolfo Fattovich from 1980 to 1995, and of the excavations at sites UA 50 and JAG 1 (Fig. 1).

This year too, the activities conducted by the Expedition were both related to the topics of the research project approved by the granting institutions<sup>2</sup> and to the needs of the cultural heritage management in the Kassala State. In particular, in this field the Expedition is actively collaborating with the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums and with the Regional Government. Indeed, the challenges to be faced for recording and investigating the endangered archaeological heritage of the region are very evident in the case of site UA 50. Actually, UA 50 will be soon affected by the implementation of an agricultural scheme in the region between the Gash and the Atbara (Upper Atbara Agricultural Irrigated Scheme) related to the new dams on the Atbara and Setit rivers. Moreover, other factors are affecting the

conservation of the archaeological heritage in the region. In the case of JAG 1, the site has somehow been protected for many years by its location right on the border with Eritrea, but in recent times it has been more and more affected by activities of people searching for gold or for treasures, whose presence in the area has been on the rise due to improved relations between the two countries. As far as K 1 (Mahal Teglinos) is concerned, the site has been affected by the heavy rains of recent years and a large part of it is endangered by intense erosion.

All these sites could also be considered relevant to the research project of the Expedition, whose objective is to obtain a better knowledge of the relations between Eastern Sudan and Upper Nubia, as well as to investigate the possible relations between the cultures of Eastern Sudan and the Red Sea coast *via* the Eastern Desert in ancient times (Manzo 2012, 314, 2014a, 1149-1152, 2017, 7). Actually, K 1 has already contributed to the study of these topics (Manzo 2012, 318-320; 2014b, 378-379; 2015, 232-233; 2017, 48-54; Manzo *et alii* 2011, 5-6, 28-30; 2012, 52-56, 60-65, 95-96). Moreover, UA 50 and JAG 1 could provide more data on the earliest and last phases of the regional cultural sequence, whose investigation is also a part of the research project (see Manzo 2015, 231, 2017, 7; Manzo *et alii* 2012, 1, 127-128).

Finally, it should be remarked that also in this field season, in the framework of the collaboration between the Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" and the Regional Government of the Kassala State, a field school in archaeology was instituted. Four junior staff members of the cultural office of the Regional Government of the Kassala State and three Italian MA and PhD students participated.

*Investigations at K 1 (Mahal Teglinos)*

K 1 (Mahal Teglinos) is a 10 ha. site located East of Kassala in a small valley in the northern part of the Jebel Taka complex. The site was investigated from 1980 to 1995 by the Italian Archaeological Mission to the Sudan (Kassala) (IAMSK) directed by Rodolfo Fattovich of the Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" (at that time

<sup>1</sup> The fieldwork took place from November 5 to December 2. The team in the field consisted of Andrea Manzo, archaeologist, director of the project and ceramic analyst (Università di Napoli "L'Orientale"), Gilda Ferrandino, field director (Università di Napoli "L'Orientale"), Elena D'Itria, archaeologist and PhD candidate (Università di Napoli "L'Orientale"), Pietro Fusco, lithic analyst and PhD candidate (Università di Napoli "L'Orientale"), Eleonora Minucci, physical anthropologist (Università di Napoli "L'Orientale"), and Errico Pontis assistant archaeologist and MA student (Università di Napoli "L'Orientale"). The colleague representing NCAM was Habab Idriss Ahmed.

<sup>2</sup> The field season was made possible by the following institutions: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (grant 2016), Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" (research grants 2015 and 2016 and grant assigned to the agreement between the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) and the Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" for the year 2016). Since 2016 the activities of the expedition take place in the framework of the cooperation agreement between "L'Orientale" and the ISMEO - Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l'Oriente.

Istituto Universitario Orientale) (Fattovich 1991, 1993; Fattovich *et alii* 1994). Previous investigations demonstrated that the site was in use at least from the 3rd millennium BC to the 1st millennium AD, although the main occupation phases of the site date from the 3rd-2nd millennia BC. In the Gash Group times (ca. early 3rd-early 2nd millennium BC) a large settlement and a cemetery characterized by monolithic stelae, a so far unique funerary monument typical of this site, developed in the central and eastern sectors of the site. More recently, a second Gash Group cemetery roughly contemporary with the first one was recorded and partially investigated in the western sector of the site (Fattovich *et alii* 1994, 16-17; Manzo 2016, 192-194; 2017, 37-38). In the Jebel Mokram Group times (early 2nd millennium BC-early 1st millennium AD) a smaller village was located in the western sector of the site.

A visit to K 1 in 2010 had evidenced the erosion that is bringing to light large sectors of a settlement in the north-western part of the site, and that some graves were cut and almost destroyed by streams in the same sector of the site. Moreover, erosion was also affecting large areas in the central sector of the site. For this reason, in 2010, 2013 2014 and 2015 six excavation units were investigated there: K 1 VI, VII, VIII, IX, X, and XII (Manzo 2012, 317-318, 2014b, 377-378, 2015, 231-233, 2016, 192-194; Manzo *et alii* 2011, 27-30). In 2016, investigations continued in K 1 XII, and were resumed in K 1 VI. K 1 XII is on the edge of a terrace east of the Islamic cemetery, occupying a part of the western sector of the site immediately north of the old excavation unit BPLF-Z and BPQA-E, while K 1 VI is on the westernmost fringes of the site, north-east of the excavation unit K 1 V investigated in 1991 (Fattovich *et alii* 1994, 17; Manzo 2016, 192-194) (Fig. 2).

K1 VI was a 6x6 m excavation unit including the old 2x2m area whose topsoil was excavated in 2010 (Manzo *et alii* 2011, 27-30).<sup>3</sup> More extensive investigations in this excavation unit already started in 2014 (Manzo 2015, 232). Several living floors characterized by concentrations of ceramic materials and by pits were brought to light. The upper ones were partially disturbed by erosion. Among the noticeable finds, some charred grains and the

fragments of a large ceramic tray, ca. 50cm in diameter, made by coiling technique and with a fabric characterized by mineral temper, similar to the ones found in 2014 and 2015 in excavation unit K 1 X (Manzo 2015, 232-233, 2017, 38). As already remarked, those trays were perhaps similar to the ethnographic *dokka* used to prepare low unleavened bread. As shown in 2014, all the living floors investigated at K1 VI were ascribed to the Jebel Mokram Group (early 2nd millennium BC-early 1st millennium BC) (Fig. 3) except for the earliest one, which gave pottery and a seal typical of the latest phases of the Gash Group (early 2nd millennium BC) (Manzo 2015, 232). In 2016 a further and earlier Gash Group living floor was brought to light, with some post holes on top and a concentration of clay material in the northwestern sector of the excavation unit, perhaps to be interpreted as the collapse of a mud brick or mud structure. This feature certainly deserves further investigation to be conducted in the next field seasons.

K1 XII is a 6x8m excavation unit.<sup>4</sup> Investigation there already started in 2015, when sixteen tombs were brought to light (Manzo 2016, 192-193). Twenty-two tombs were added in 2016.

Only a single tomb in highly contracted position to be ascribed to a late post-Gash Group use of the area was discovered. It is the burial of a child, with head to the North-West and is located in the southeastern sector of the excavation unit. It was associated with a small rough clay statuette, perhaps a toy. Moreover, a further tomb containing a skeleton in contracted position and with an East-West orientation, with head to the East and facing North, brought to light by erosion, was discovered and recorded East of the excavation unit (Fig. 4). Those two graves can be ascribed to the latest group of tombs with bodies in contracted position, already recorded in a sector of the western cemetery not far from K1 XII in 1994-1995 and in 2015, and perhaps going back to Jebel Mokram Group times (Fattovich *et alii* 1994, 16; Manzo 2016, 193, 2017, 47).

Twenty graves were characterized by bodies in extended position on the back, with orientation varying from North-South with head to South, to East-West with head to the East or to the West. The remaining grave was a double

<sup>3</sup> The excavation was supervised by Gilda Ferrandino.

<sup>4</sup> The excavation was supervised by Andrea Manzo, Habab Idriss Ahmed Idriss, and Elena D'Itria.

one and contained a main body in extended position and a secondary body in highly contracted position (see below). The fact that several of those graves cut or overlap each other testify the intense use of this cemetery (Fig. 5). The intense and repeated funerary use of the area is now also confirmed by radiocarbon dates obtained for the earlier Gash Group phase recorded in this excavation unit<sup>5</sup> and for a couple of later funerary features<sup>6</sup>, and dating respectively around 2800-2500 BC and to the second half of the 2nd millennium BC.

The pits of the earlier tombs with skeletons in extended position were cut from a living floor on top of which structures consisting of stone slabs, stelae, a small only partially preserved structure made of granite rocks, and some well defined concentrations of animal bones, pottery and burned material, to be interpreted as offering places were laying (Fig. 6). This living floor is preserved only in the upslope squares of the excavation unit, while downslope it may have been destroyed by erosion. Radiocarbon dates and associated materials both suggest that this living floor and the associated structures and tombs may go back to the earliest phases of the Gash Group (see also Manzo 2016, 193). Other tombs with skeletons in extended position cut or overlap the structures associated with this living floor and are obviously later, although unfortunately the living floors from where they were excavated were completely destroyed by erosion. Also considering the results of the previous excavations conducted in this area (Manzo 2016, 193-194), as well as the above mentioned radiocarbon dates, these can be ascribed to the mature and late phases of the Gash Group (second half of the 3rd mill. BC).

The grave goods were limited to personal ornaments and mainly to lip plugs, except for two tombs where two complete pots, a bowl and a shouldered jar, were collected. An intriguing discovery was represented by a tomb of a three month old child in the southeastern sector of the excavation unit richly provided of personal ornaments made of cawrie shells and ostrich eggshell beads (Fig. 7). A double tomb gave a body in extended position with East-West orientation and the head to the East and, on its side, near and overlapped by its left leg, a body

in a highly contracted position with an East-West orientation, the head to the East. Given its completely different attitude and its position, in a side of the funerary pit, it is very likely that the body in contracted position represents a sacrificed person. A further interesting tomb characterized by the occurrence of several berries, most likely *Celtis integrifolia*, intentionally put in the funerary pit was investigated in the southeastern sector of the excavation unit (Fig. 8). A fragmentary pot full of similar grains has been found nearby in association with a tomb in 2015, suggesting that this specific fruit had a special religious funerary meaning in Gash Group times. Finally, the occurrence of traces of several trauma on the bones was remarked in a tomb in the eastern sector of the excavation unit: they consisted of a healed double fracture of the right femur and a wound to the skull that may have been mortal.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Investigations at UA 50*

UA 50 is a site in the southwestern sector of the area endangered by the implementation of the Upper Atbara Agricultural Irrigation Scheme, not far from the Khor Marmareb.<sup>8</sup> As shown by the survey conducted in 2010 by NCAM (see Manzo *et alii* 2012, 43, 119) and in 2014 by the expedition, the site was characterized by the possible presence of eroded tumulus or mounds and by concentrations of shells originating from Mesolithic (6th millennium BC) assemblages. In 2015 a shell mound was brought to light in excavation unit UA 50 I and gave late Mesolithic materials and samples of charred organic materials dating to ca. 5000 BC, while a further test pit (UA 50 II) was investigated closer to the wadi bordering the site to the North (Manzo 2016, 194). In 2016, two excavation units were investigated: UA 50 III, and IV.

UA 50 III is a 10x10m excavation unit intended to investigate some shell middens whose upper part was brought to light by erosion. Two shell middens were brought to the light in the northern and in the western sector of

<sup>5</sup> Beta-428646 4140 ± 30 BP, calibrated 2 σ 2875-2580 BC. All calibrations were obtained with INTCAL13 curve.

<sup>6</sup> Beta-468278 3710 ± 30 BP, calibrated 2 σ 2201-2024 BC, and Beta-468278 3860 ± 30 BP, calibrated 2 σ 2461-2210 BC.

<sup>7</sup> The study of the human bones is going to be performed by Eleonora Minucci in collaboration with Luca Bondioli and Alessandra Sperduti of the Section of Physical Anthropology of the Museo delle Civiltà (formerly Museo Nazionale Preistorico e Etnografico "Luigi Pigorini"), Rome.

<sup>8</sup> Investigations at UA 50 were supervised by Andrea Manzo, Habab Idriss Ahmed Idriss, Gilda Ferrandino and Elena D'Itria.

the excavation unit. The northern shell midden resulted to be ca. 3x3 m large and up to 10-15 cm thick and consisted of shells of land snails, apparently mostly *Pila ovata*, and animal bones sampled for identification (Fig. 9). It also contained potsherds and lithics. The same finds also characterized the western midden, only partially excavated.

UA 50 IV was a 10 × 10 m excavation unit in the northern sector of the site, where some burials were brought to light by erosion. Eight badly preserved tombs were identified there. Only in five cases it was possible to ascertain that the bodies were laying in highly contracted position, with a North-South or East-West orientation facing different directions. Only one of these graves gave a grave good, consisting of a lip plug.

Moreover, seven tombs were recorded and investigated in the central sector of the site outside the excavation units. In five cases the bodies were in contracted to highly contracted position, with a roughly North-South orientation, the head to the North (Fig. 10). Interestingly, two of these tombs (Tomb 4 and Tomb 6) were multiple. Tomb 4 contained four badly preserved skeletons, presumably in contracted or highly contracted position, in the two only cases in which the orientation could be ascertained it was South/West-North/East with head to the South/West facing East, and West-East. Tomb 6 contained more than seven skeletons, with different orientations. Some grave goods such as beads, cowrie shells, and a lip plug were collected in those multiple tombs. It should be remarked that although these multiple tombs are highly affected by erosion - as indeed also the single ones - the fact that the bones of what remains of different individuals are in direct contact and still in anatomic connection suggests that the bodies were put simultaneously in the graves. The absolute chronology of the tombs investigated at UA 50 remains to be ascertained. The occurrence of some Jebel Mokram Group sherds in the surface collections from the central part of the site, where the tombs seem to cluster, as well as the lid of an imported Egyptian calcite vessel collected on the surface of the same sector of the site and possibly originally associated to a tomb (see Manzo 2016, 194), may suggest a date to the 2nd millennium BC.

### *Investigations at JAG 1*

Some excavations and surveys were conducted at site JAG 1, South-West of Kassala. JAG 1 is a multi-phase site already recorded in the survey conducted in the Eighties and visited by the expedition in 2013 (Manzo 2014, 382-383) while in 2015 systematic investigations were started in three excavation units, JAG 1 I, II and III, in order to investigate a large tumulus and some shelters in a settlement area near the foot of the jebel (Manzo 2016, 194-195). In 2016, excavations were resumed in excavation units JAG 1 I and II.

JAG I and II are two adjacent 10 × 10 m excavation units including a large 12 m in diameter tumulus characterized on the surface by a ring of granite rocks and an eroded topping of white quartz pebbles.<sup>9</sup> A central transect of the tumulus was investigated. There, the floor on top of which the tumulus was built was brought to light. The tumulus resulted to be built of soil and the ring of granite rocks occurs only on the surface, suggesting that its purpose might have been to maintain the topping of quartz pebbles in place. On the soil on top of which the tumulus was built, mixed materials ranging in date from the 4th millennium BC to the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD were collected. This already suggested a quite late date for the tumulus, as it was later than or contemporary to the latest materials in this stratum (Manzo 2016, 194).

In 2016, investigations were resumed with the aim of investigating the top of a possible funerary pit filled with stones partially brought to light under the tumulus in the previous field season. The funerary pit was preceded by a larger irregular pit. The lower pit, ca. 2 × 1m, was characterized by a curvilinear perimeter and was filled by granite stones, many of them being reused or broken grinding stones, as well as a flat round topped stone slab and an elongated ellipsoidal in section stone object, perhaps architectural elements. At the base of the lower pit, a small 50 cm deep curvilinear niche occurs on the western side. A badly preserved skeleton in contracted position, with the head to the South and facing East was found at the base of the pit, where also some glass and carnelian beads as well as at least seven iron arrowheads - some clearly barbed- and a spearhead occur (Fig. 11). The occurrence of flakes of bones associated with some beads and a leaf-shaped

<sup>9</sup> The excavation was supervised by Elena D'Itria and Habab Idriss Ahmed Idriss.

iron spearhead also in the niche may suggest that the tomb was somehow robbed and disturbed, perhaps in ancient times. The type of the collected arrowheads (see Lenoble 1997, 143-144), as well as the organization of the underground parts of the tumulus and the position of the body (see El-Tayeb 2012, 53-55, fig. 9-10) suggest for this tomb a transitional Meroitic to Post-Meroitic or Post-Meroitic date and cultural affiliation.

#### *Final Remarks*

Although the analysis of the collected data and of the exported samples is still in progress, some preliminary remarks on the results of the 2016 field season can be proposed.

Also this year, excavations at Mahal Teglinos K 1 demonstrated to be very fruitful. The new investigations in the western cemetery area at Mahal Teglinos are adding fresh evidence on the Gash Group (early 3rd-early 2nd millennium BC) funerary rituals, style of life, subsistence strategies and society, as well as on its development through time, to be integrated with the data already available for the eastern cemetery and the more limited test pits in the settlement area in the central sector of the site. Moreover, the continuation of the excavation in the westernmost sector of Mahal

Teglinos K 1 may provide insights into the organization of Jebel Mokram Group (early 2nd-mid-1st millennium BC) and late Gash Group (early 2nd millennium BC) settlement areas and the structures characterizing them.

For the first time since the excavation conducted by Shiner near the Atbara in the Seventies (Shiner *et alii* 1971), investigations at UA 50 are providing new data on the Mesolithic phase in Eastern Sudan. Moreover, although badly affected by erosion, the tombs in the central sector of UA 50 may complement the information provided by Mahal Teglinos K 1 for a better understanding of the 2nd millennium BC funerary rituals, as well as for putting the major site -and so far the only one extensively investigated- in a broader regional setting.

As far as the investigations at JAG 1 are concerned, the results of the 2016 field season promise to add data on the latest phases of occupation of the region, namely the 1st millennium BC and 1st millennium AD. In particular, it was demonstrated that JAG 1 was frequented by transitional Meroitic to Post-Meroitic or Post-Meroitic groups, and thus represents the easternmost and southernmost site with such a cultural affiliation so far recorded.

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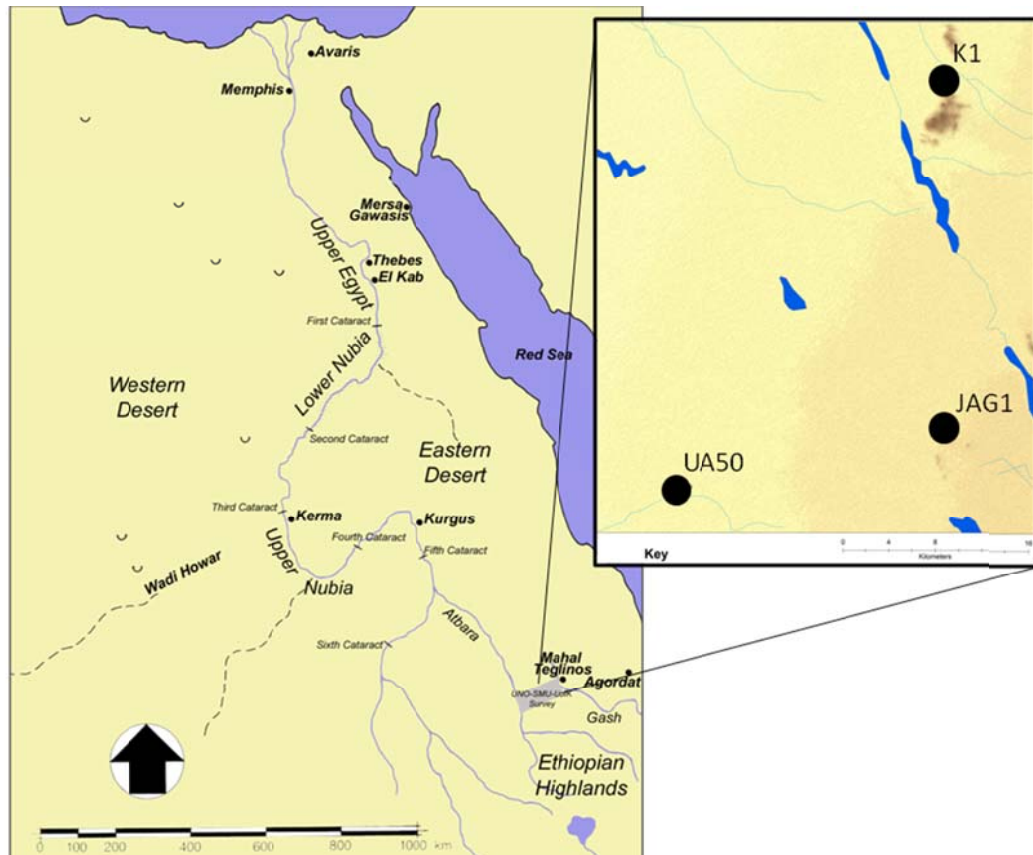


Fig. 1 - Map showing the location of the area under investigation, and the sites investigated in the 2016 field season

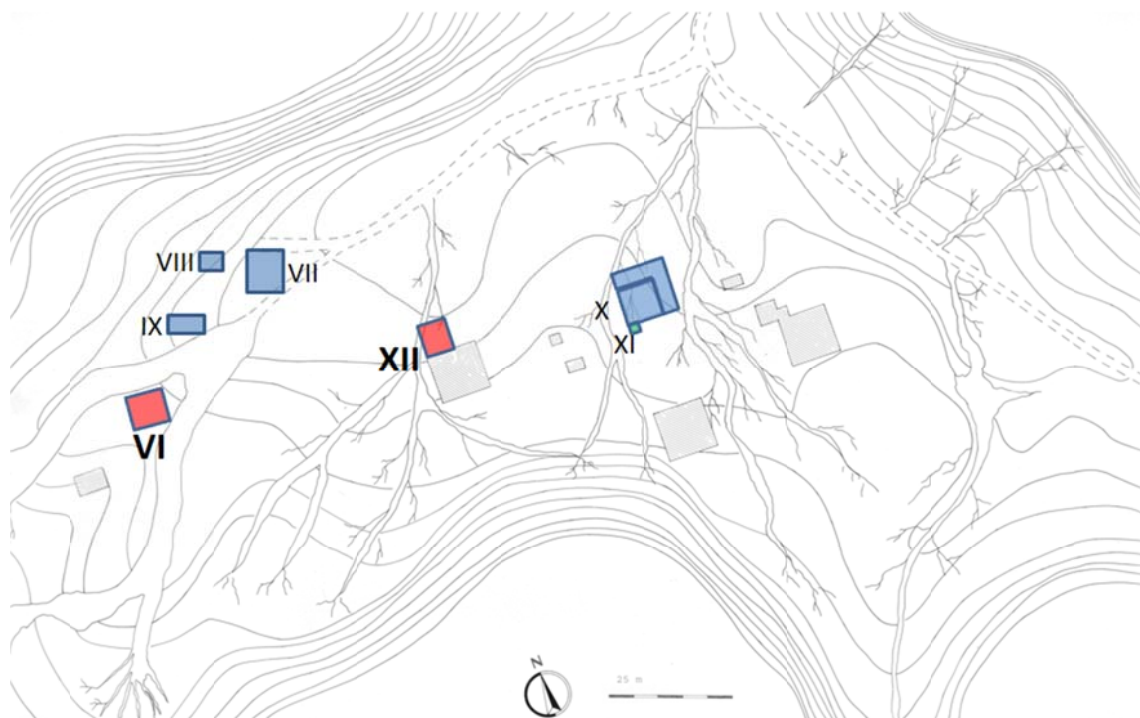


Fig. 2 - Map of the excavation units investigated at K 1-Mahal Teglinos in Eighties and Nineties (gray color), 2010-2015 (blue color), and 2016 (red color)





Fig. 3 - Excavation unit K 1 VI, square B3, SU 13 some pits on a Jebel Mokram Group living floor dating to the first half of the 2nd millennium BC



Fig. 4 - A tomb containing a skeleton in contracted position and with an East-West orientation, head to the East and facing North, brought to light by erosion East of the excavation unit K 1 XII. Most likely it dates to the 2nd millennium BC

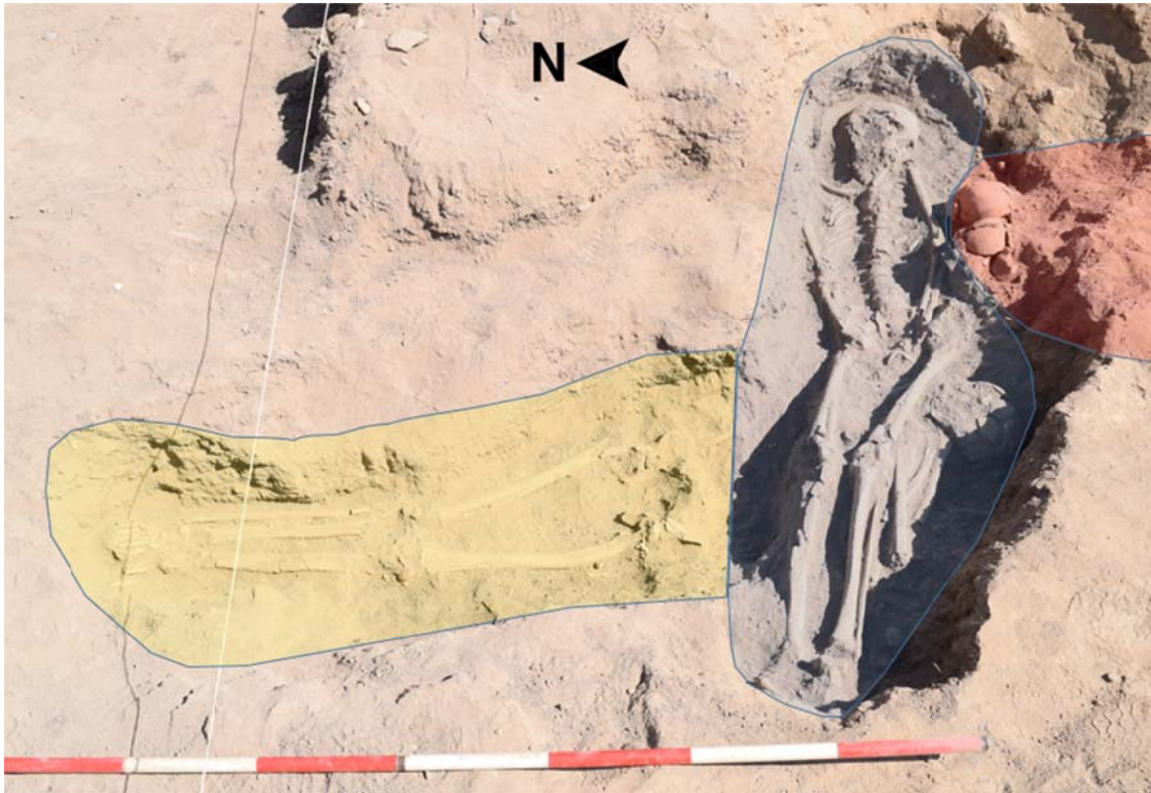


Fig. 5 - Excavation unit K 1 XII southern extension of squares E1 and E2, Tomb 35, highlighted in blue, cutting earlier Tomb 33, highlighted in yellow, and in turn cut by a later, still unexcavated, tomb partially visible in the southern profile, where two skulls, highlighted in red, were already brought to light



Fig. 6 - Excavation unit K 1 XII, squares and E1-E3 and D1-D3, living floor with Early Gash Group funerary structures made of granite slabs and stelae, with an associated complete vessel in the foreground. The later Gash Group Tomb 30 cutting the living floor is also visible and highlighted in red



Fig. 7 - Excavation unit K 1 XII, square D3, SU 52, Tomb 18 containing the remains of a three month old child covered by personal ornaments made of cowrie shells and ostrich eggshell beads



Fig. 8 - Excavation unit K 1 XII, square E3, SU 17 cut by Tomb 21 and detail of the associated filling between the basin and the backbone where several berries, most likely *Celtis integrifolia*, can be seen

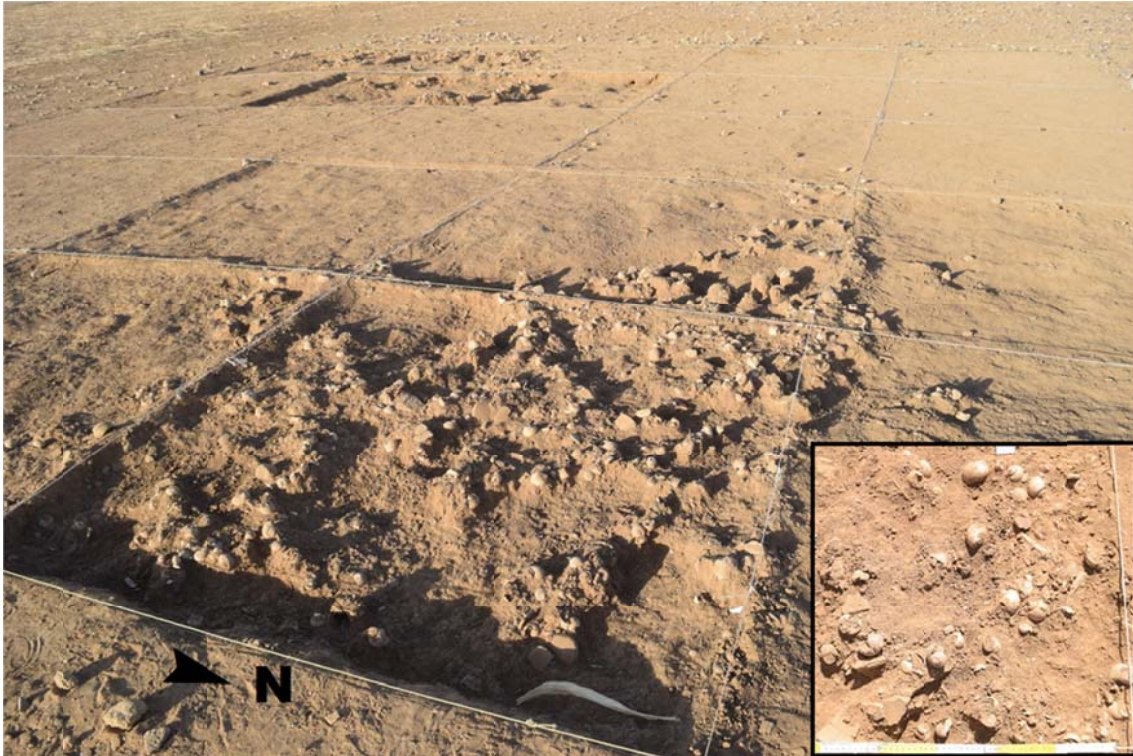


Fig. 9 - Excavation unit UA 50 III, general view with shell midden SU 2 in the foreground and shell midden SU 3 in the background. A detail of shell midden SU 2 with shells of land snails, potsherds and animal bones is shown as well.



Fig. 10 - UA 50, Tomb 7 outside excavation units

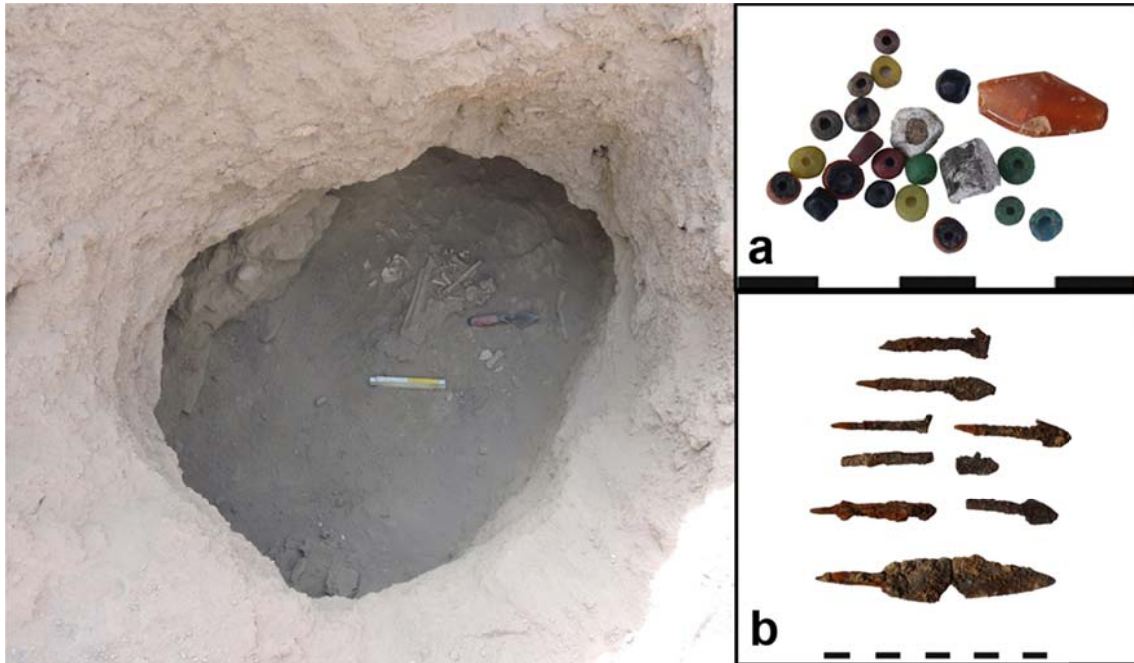


Fig. 11 - Excavation units JAG 1 I and II, the base of the funerary pit with badly disturbed remains of a skeleton, some of the associated glass and carnelian beads (a), as well as the iron spearhead and arrowheads (b)