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Two unusual monuments in the Northern Dongola Reach of the Nile, Sudan

During the course of the survey conducted on the east bank of the Nile in the Northern Dongola Reach on behalf of the Sudan Archaeological Research Society between 1993 and 1997 two unusual monuments were discovered. Here the nature of these monuments will be briefly discussed and suggestions made with regard to their function and possible parallels.¹

Both are distinctive and unique monuments within the survey concession which covered an area of approximately 930 km² (Pl. 1). They occupy the same position relative to the local topography, set within a few metres of the steep slope leading down from the desert plateau to the wide alluvial plain of the Nile Valley. As such they enjoy extensive views over the valley and are readily visible. Although only 1.5 km apart there is no suggestion that they are in any way associated and they are not the only monuments to occupy a similar position. In their immediate vicinity are a number of cairns and what may be hut circles.

The northern monument, designated site P35 (Fig. 1), consisted of a prominent sub-rectangular mound ca. 10 x 8 m in size and about 1.5 m in height. In the centre is a cairn 1.5 m in diameter and 0.5 m high. The whole appears to be formed of a mass of rough pieces of stone. There was a hint that the mound may be the collapsed remains of a rectangular structure but this is far from clear. What is highly unusual about this monument are the features extending from it to the east (Pl. 2 and 3). At the west end, first visible among the stone blocks of the mound under which they apparently extend (they presumably only extend under the rubble collapse from the mound/structure rather than pre-dating its

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Pl. 1. The location of sites P35 and P26 in the Northern Dongola Reach.

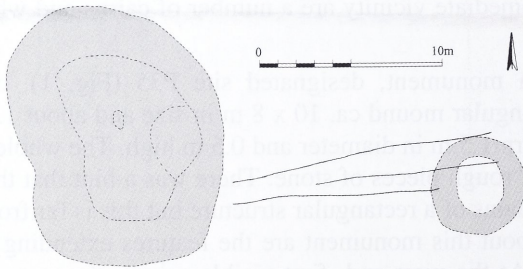


Fig. 1. The monument P35 in the Northern Dongola Reach.



Pl. 2. The monument at P35, general view looking west.



Pl. 3. Detail of the stone alignments at P35 looking south west.

construction.), are small stone slabs set firmly into the ground on edge and forming two roughly straight but slightly diverging lines (1.2 - 2.5 m apart) for a maximum distance of 14.7 m. Set between the two, and beginning 5 m to the west of the mound, is a third line of stones which runs parallel to, and is located a little closer to, the southern stone alignment. Overlying the eastern end of the alignments is a circle of stones, perhaps a hut circle, which may not have been an original component of the structure. Very few finds were recovered from this site and none can be certainly associated with the construction of the monument. A date within the Kerma period is possible but by no means certain.

Parallels for this monument within the Nile Valley are not known to the writer. The association of small upright stones with tomb monuments is not uncommon in the region. In the Kerma Ancien cemetery at Site H29 in the Northern Dongola Reach there were concentric rings of small stones set into the low tumuli and a similar arrangement is known from Kerma (Welsby 2001: 56-57, pl. 3.15; Bonnet 1990: figs 61 and 62). Rings of upright slabs are a common feature of graves in the Eastern Desert (Castiglioni et al. 1995: 69) and the Red Sea littoral (Magid et al. 1997: figs 2, 3 and 5) while individual stelae are known from the cemetery at Mahal Teglinos close to Kassala dating to the Middle, Classic and Late Gash Group (ca. 2700-1700 BC), and associated with C-Group graves; those at Aniba of very considerable size (Fattovich 1989; Steindorff 1935: Tafel 8-15). For linear arrangements of stones however, one has to look far to the west, to Libya and beyond from where many have been published (see for example Le Quellec 1990; Faleschini 1997; Gauthier & Gauthier 1998; 1999: 89-91; Falce & Falce 2000). Other linear arrangements of stones are common in the Middle East forming features associated with hunting. These, known as kites, are often very large and were used to channel animals towards a killing ground (see for example (Helms & Betts 1987).²

Most kites are of considerable size and the Dongola Reach example is clearly not of this type. However, there are some much smaller examples noted especially in the Sinai and Negev which are of the same order of magnitude as site P35 (Helms & Betts 1987: fig. 11). At site P35 the stones in the lines leading to the mound/structure stand very little above the ground surface although it is possible that they were used to support a lightweight fence of organic material. Conversely the structure, if such a thing is buried within the mound, at the west end is very substantial. The linear features could have channelled animals into the structure, although considering the shortness of the lines, these may have been domestic animals rather than wild animals in a hunting context. That they

² Evidence for what may be a functionally similar installation, consisting of lines of stones and timber posts, the latter thought to be the supports for a net, has been noted immediately to the west of the Nile at Soleb (Schiff Giorgini 1967-68: 255).

were not used to harvest rain water run-off is clear as the ground slopes up from east to west at this point.

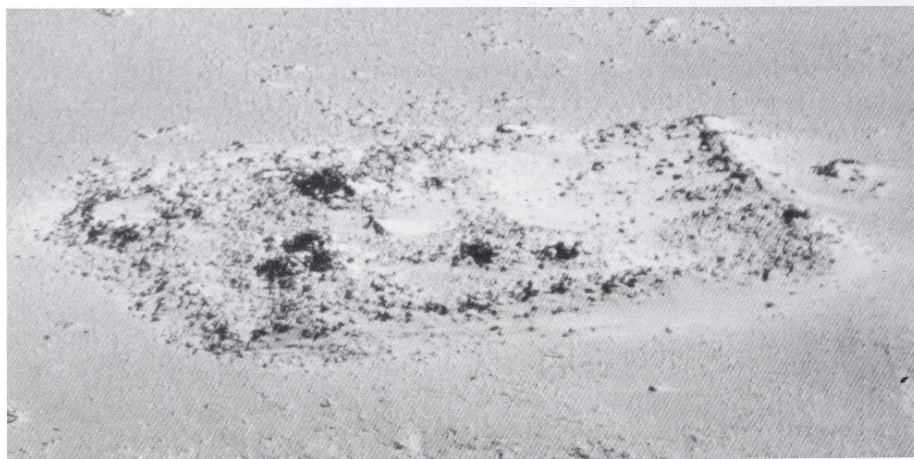
The other monument, designated site P26(29), is a rectilinear structure (Plates 4-6), the plan of which is partly masked by the rubble from its own collapse and by secondary stone hut circles and cairns erected on its ruined surface. Wall faces are visible, largely buried within the rubble, which allow a tentative reconstruction of its original form (Fig. 2.1). It is a trapezoidal structure, ca. 31 x 20-22 m in size, with its long axis aligned north-south. The southern third is occupied by a courtyard entered through the middle of the south wall by a narrow entrance flanked for a length of approximately 5 m by the inturned south wall. A small section of the external face of the south wall was partly cleared and four narrow courses ca. 120 – 140 mm thick, of roughly-coursed rubble laid as stretchers, were visible standing to a height of 460 mm. The floor inside the courtyard is at the same level as the external ground surface. Most of the rest of the building is on a podium over 500 mm high within which is a small chamber, with minimum dimensions of approximately 7 x 4 m, entered from the courtyard through a narrow doorway set slightly to the east of the centre line of the building. The floor of this chamber appears to have been at the same level as that of the courtyard although now it is extensively sanded up.

The podium, faced with rough blocks, appears from surface indications to be infilled with rubble. No evidence was found for a floor surface on top of it. Set into the top of the podium, and barely surviving above its surface, is the outer face of a wall which appears to delimit the chamber. This upper storey is roughly square and is set at an angle to the main axis of the podium/courtyard. Its west wall is ca. 4 m thick while the north wall may have been thicker, perhaps up to 6 m. The walls are constructed with a face of smaller and thinner slabs than those noted in the wall of the courtyard; the facing stones were all laid as stretchers. Very few finds were recovered from the vicinity of this building and there is nothing which can, with any confidence, be used to suggest a date for it. Immediately at the foot of the slope is a Kerma settlement but there is no evidence, for or against, associating the two.

There is no building known to the writer in the Middle Nile valley or in its hinterland which is comparable to this structure. What may be not dissimilar structures have, however, been reported in the far west, in Morocco and, although one would not like to suggest any direct link over such a vast distance, the form and function of those structures offers a possible explanation for the function of the building in the Northern Dongola Reach. The relevant monuments lie in the extreme south-east of Morocco at Taouz and Beraber (Meunié & Allain 1956). Among the large circular tumuli at the former site is a rectangular building 11.3 x



Pl. 4. The monument at P26(29), aerial view looking north.



Pl. 5. The monument at P26(29), aerial view looking east.



Pl. 6. General view of the monument at P26(29) looking north.

9.5-10 m in size, its long axis aligned north west to south east (Fig. 2.2). The southern third is a courtyard entered through a centrally placed doorway. The northern part is a solid podium in which is a small rectangular chamber, set partly over an oval burial chamber, entered from the courtyard. At Beraber North is a rectangular podium, 13.9 x 10.9-12.2 m in size and 1.1 m in height on which is placed a stepped structure of at least three storeys, attaining a maximum elevation of 3.3 m (Fig. 2.3). Entrances to three burial chambers are visible along the south-east face of the podium.

Of not dissimilar form to the Beraber North tomb are a number of monuments in Eastern Sudan particularly at Maman a little to the north of Kassala and at Asaramaderheib. These are most often square and two or three storeys in height, the uppermost storey usually being circular. Within the square base is a vaulted chamber entered by a low door. All are constructed from roughly dressed flat stones (Paul 1952; Delany 1952; Hinkel 1992: 76-77, fig. 10 with references). A medieval date has been suggested for them. To these may be added the monument erected over the tomb of the Kushite queen Amanitore (Beg. N.1) at Meroe, which survives as a two-storey monument, each storey a truncated pyramidal shape (Dunham 1957: 119-121).

The data provided by the survey of the two monuments in the Northern Dongola Reach offers no clear evidence for either their date or function. The

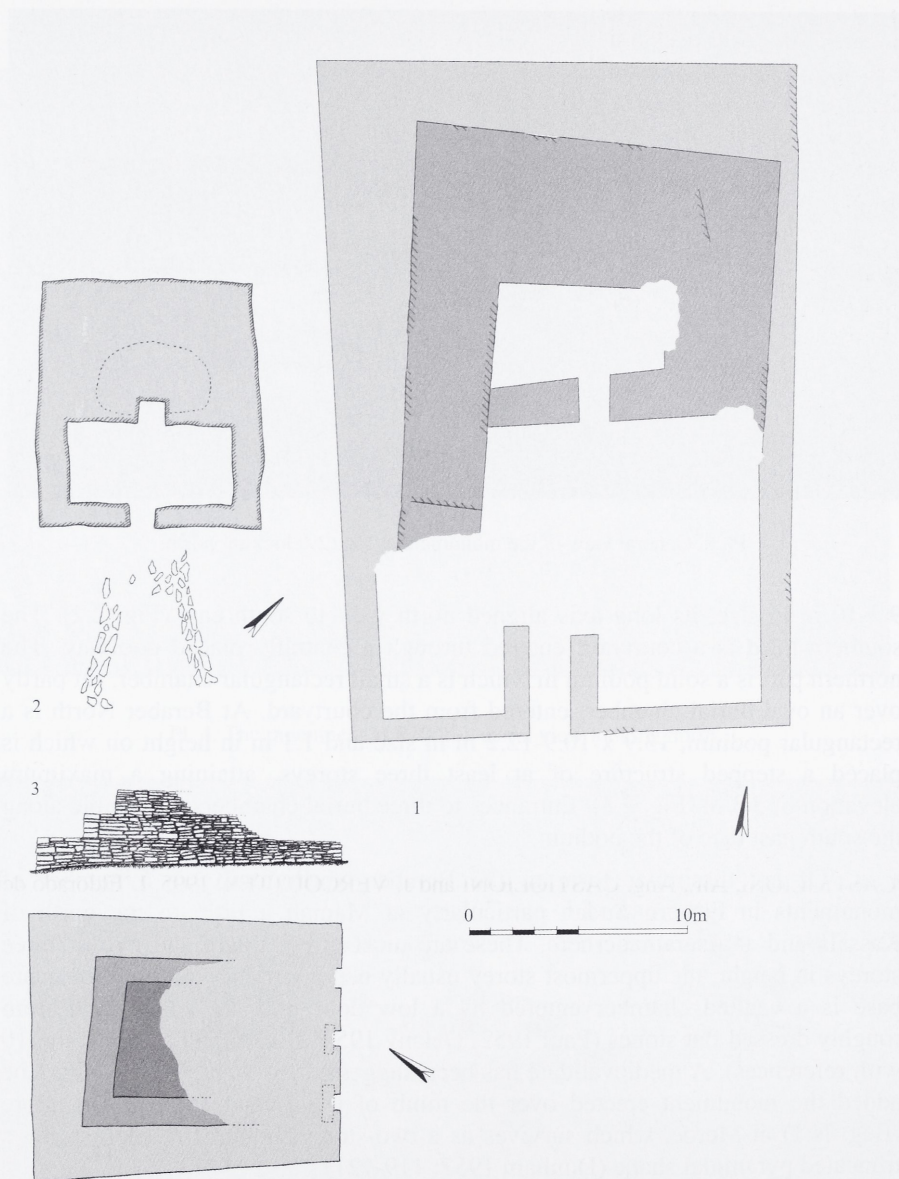


Fig. 2.1. The monument P26(29) in the Northern Dongola Reach;
 Fig. 2.2. The rectangular tomb monument at Taouz (after Meunié & Allain 1956, fig. 13).
 Fig. 2.3. Multi-storey monument at Beraber North (after Meunié & Allain 1956, fig. 19).

parallels noted above suggest that site P26 may be funerary although this does not exclude other possibilities (a religious monument, a military or administrative structure). The site is only a few kilometres south of where a modern track leading from the Northern Dongola Reach across the desert to Kareima leaves the Nile Valley. Its location might be compared to the enclosure found to the east of Kerma, in that case set at the foot of the plateau rather than on its summit (see Bonnet & Reinold 1993).

The remains at site P35 may also be funerary but there is the possibility that they were associated with hunting or livestock management. Only excavation will offer the possibility of further elucidation of these unusual monuments.

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