

## Medieval and Post-Medieval archaeology in the Sudan: a study of two cemeteries at Mura, Northern State

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**Abstract** The study of Post-Medieval and more recent periods has received limited attention in the Sudanese archaeology (Adams 1987; Pillips 2004, 58; Edwards 2003; 2004), although, this has begun to change with an increasing interest in the archaeology of the wider Sudan itself.

The present study aims to record in detail all archaeological features and remains at Mura village, northern Sudan to shed more lights on its history as well as to explore the landscape of the study area.

The study documented different types of archaeological features in Wad Beliel cemetery, which includes four types of burials; Ordinary graves, *Gubbas*, Mastaba, and Binaya. As well as recorded a medieval box grave. cemeteries beside the Islamic. cemeteries in Awlad Afugara Cemetery

**Keywords:** Post-Medieval; wider Sudan ; Wad Beliel .

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## 1. Introduction:

The study of Post-Medieval and more recent periods has received limited attention in the Sudanese archaeology (Adams 1987; Pillips 2004, 58; Edwards 2003; 2004), although, this has begun to change with an increasing interest in the archaeology of the wider Sudan itself (Osman 1986; Soghayroun 2000; Elsadig 2000). Virtually no excavations of Post-Christian sites have yet been published. However, over the last decades, a considerable progress has been made in more reliable outline histories of these periods, often linked to archaeological data. The potential for archaeology to provide new understandings of these periods, often poorly served in terms of historical sources, is also becoming better-appreciated (Osman and Edwards 2012, 173).

The studies for the first part of the Post-Medieval period have tended to be framed around the major political units of the period, the Sultanates of Sinnar and Darfur, and Ottoman Egypt. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there have emerged a range of competing and often conflicting narratives, produced by a range of Egyptian, European and Sudanese historians (Warburg 1992), again largely framed in terms of ‘local’ experiences (Osman and Edwards 2012, 173).

The Islamic holy men who came to Sudan earlier ‘possibly 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards’ as religious teachers represented one of the dominant themes of the Post-Medieval history of the Sudan. They played a fundamental role in the construction of northern Sudanese historical consciousness through their written legacy, notably compilations of biographies of religious notables such as the *Kitab al Tabaqat* of Wad Dayf Allah. These have in turn become primary sources for more general historical studies of the period (McHugh 1994; Spaulding 1985; Edwards 2004). The most obvious markers of the Islamic holy men ‘or as they are known locally (fuqara)’ are their domed *Qubba* tombs,

which are widely separated in different styles across much of northern and central Sudan, and indeed many other parts of Sudanic and Sahelian Africa (Osman and Edwards 2012, 197) . Their significance as early monuments to the spread of Islam is increasingly well-recognized and some work has begun on their recording and description (cf. El Sadig 2000; Soghayroun; 1998; 2004).

The religious holy men (*fuqara*) represented a part of new Islamic elites which influenced a considerable power on both the major kingdoms as well as the intervening areas. The power and reputation of many never extended beyond their local communities. Others however, were to become part of extensive networks of power, commonly working through Sufi *tariqas* (Edwards 2004, 268). Again, the presence of Qubbas as burial of Islamic holy men encouraged growing new Islamic settlement landscapes around them (Edwards 2004, 267; Osman and Edwards 2012, 197) which represent the core of different villages and towns in central and northern Sudan.

## **2. The study area:**

The study area is situated in Shaigiya region which extends within riverine Sudan, from the Nile bend bellow the 4<sup>th</sup> cataract as far as the borders of Nubian speaking Dongola (Spaulding 1990, 283). The area of study is part of what we call Kannar villages union, named after the Wadi Kannar in the area. It comprises the villages of Al-Rekabbia, Mura, EL-Takkar, Elsidr and Kuri.

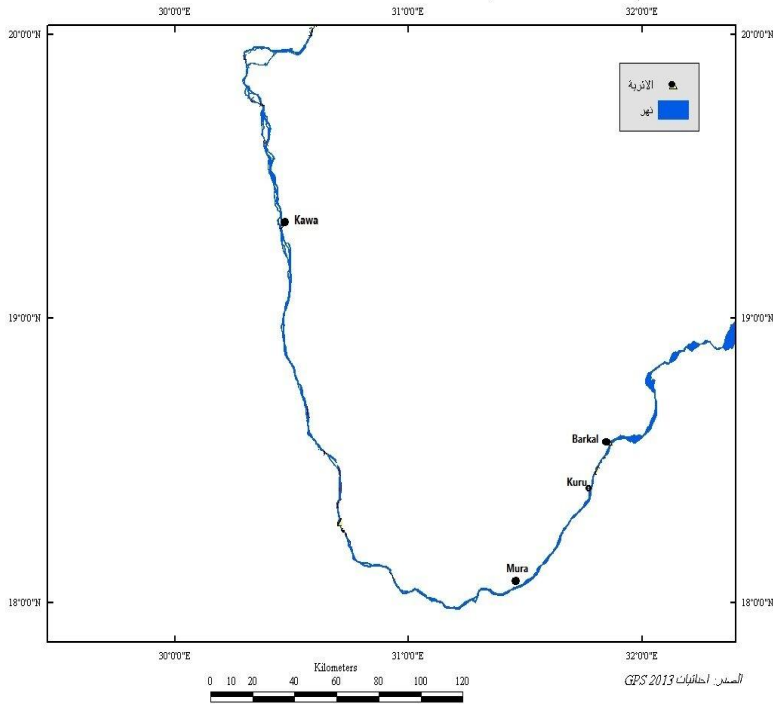


Fig. (1), Study area

The cemeteries are located in the north and north-east of Mura village in the border between Mura and EL-Rekabbia villages. The cemeteries have many Qubbas beside the ordinary oval graves which go back to the 17<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In my survey of the site of Wad Beliel, it is found that the site has four Qubbas; three are still standing and one is collapsed except of its base. They were built of mud and were conical in shape. According to the local inhabitants, the Qubbas belong to sheiks Wad Beliel, Ahmed El-Aglaan, Abdelrahmaan Abu Tamrah and Salih Fadul.

## 2.1. Geographical overview:

Whiteman (1971, 11) describes the geographic subdivisions of Nubia and its geological formations which consist of a basement complex of pre-Cambrian and enclosed by

the Nubian sandstone. The basement complex consists of sedimentary rocks, a variety of igneous and metamorphic, sandstones, and mudstones (Whiteman 1971, 54-55).

Furthermore, Edwards (1989, 13) states that the Nubian sandstone and the basement complex consist of sands and clays deposits. On the other hand, Barbour (1961, 138) points out that the river leaves the zone of blackened igneous rocks and flows over the Nubian series, which is represented by orange-yellow Sandstone.

Sand dunes represented a prominent feature of the area which pass into the rock stones and sandy wastes of the Sahara. They are deep sands, consisting of grains of a uniform size and were formed by the action of the wind blowing the weathered material from the Nubian series in the north and depositing it in sheets and long dunes running north-south (Worrall 1957, 8). As a result, the river bed is constantly changing as the Nile continuous to cut through the altered landscape on a regular basis towards the so called 'Debba bend' of the Nile (Zurawski and Phillips 1999, 57).

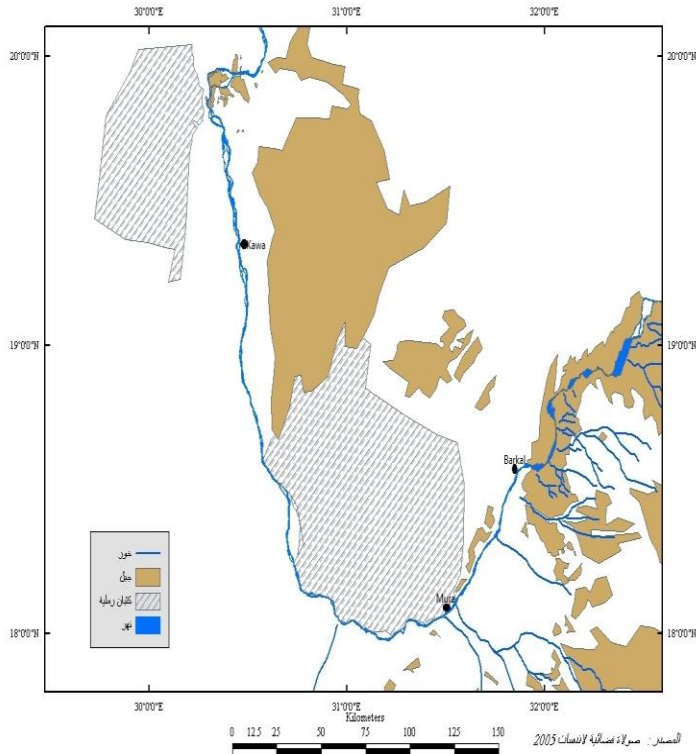


Fig. (2), Landscape of the area

The available agriculture land is restricted to a narrow strip along the bank of the Nile. In the study such a strip is rich alluvial land as a basin. The basin here is floored with silt and clay, and at high Nile is flooded either naturally or else through artificial channels. When the Nile flood is particularly high, large areas are liable to be flooded (cf. Barbour; 1961, 133).

Beyond the alluvial terraces the land rises gently on either side of the Nile to a sandy or gravel-covered plain of desert erosion. A part from the local redistribution of material by summer storms, there is some down-cutting and deposition to be observed, particularly on the left bank, where several watercourses draining the Bayuda desert flow into the Nile (Barbour; 1961, 138).

### **3. The Archaeological fieldwork:**

Archaeological sites in Mura were firstly recorded by the Southern Dongola Reach Survey of the University of Warswa directed by Bogdan Zurawski, (Zurawski and Phillips 1999, 55). These efforts have been made during the initial season of survey, on the east bank of the Nile between Old Dongola and Khor Makhafour near Ez-Zuma in January-February 1998. The Islamic cemetery of Sheick Wad Beliel has been tackled in an initial study by Mohamed Fath Alrahman Ahmed from the University of Dongola during his PhD dissertation (Ahmed 2017, 65-68). However, the present study is the first of its kind to investigate the area in detail.

The present study aims to record in detail all medieval and Post-Medieval archaeological features and remains at the area to shed more lights on its history as well as to explore the landscape of the study area. In addition, a set of air photographs were used to make a map of the fields. This was achieved by recording archaeological features in the study area using a systematic surface survey, identifying features recorded by GPS, Digital photography, and sketch drawings. This approach was particularly fruitful in the area, where it is possible to record a medieval box grave cemeteries beside the Islamic cemeteries.

As a result, two different cemetery fields were re-investigated and documented.



Fig (3), Satellite Image of cemetery fields Sheik Wad Beliel in the blue circle

### **3.1. Awlad Al Fugara cemetery:**

This cemetery is situated at the north-east side of Mura close to El Rekkabia village, and of about 500m east of Wad Beliel cemetery. Such a cemetery extends for about 200x350m.

All graves in this cemetery were marked by two upstanding black tomb stones, possibly from Nubian sandstone. Although, several regular rows of graves were marked by low mounds, some were surrounded by low rectangular walls. Their north–south orientation indicates that they are Muslim burials.





Fig (4), General view of Awlad Al Fugara Cemetery

On the western side of the cemetery there are remains of a tomb marked by upstanding mud bricks. It is like a base of Qubba standing of about 50cm, with 3m in diameter.

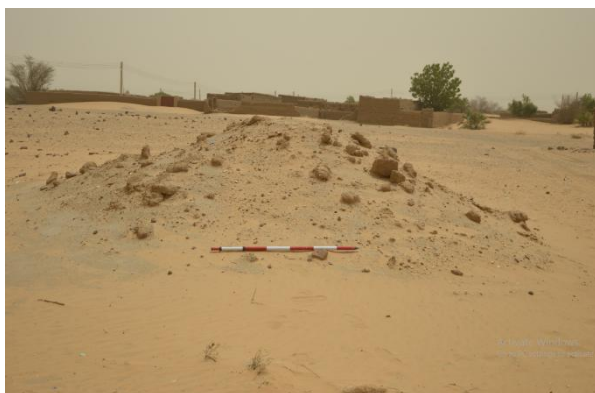
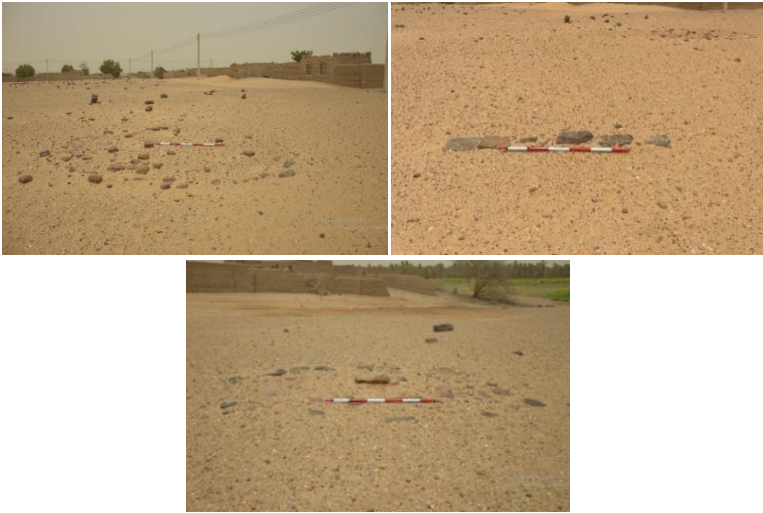


Fig (5-6), the remains of Qubba and rounded stone structure in the cemetery

It has been noticed in this study that a Christian rounded and Box-grave superstructures built of red brick with east-west orientation with various diameters and length, max 2, 2.50-3m were survived on an elevated gravel ground in the more eastern side of the cemetery.



Figs (7-9) rounded and box-grave superstructures at the cemetery

These features are very common within the Christian period in Sudan's lower and upper Nubia (Adams 1977, 480; Zurawski 1987). Rectangular box-graves were found within the Abu Hamad reach, at least, as far south as the 5<sup>th</sup> Nile cataract. In addition, several sites have been found in Baiyuda desert. More substantial, possibly circular red brick superstructures often with Christian inscriptions were found at W. Dom etor, Usheir and El Koro. Crawford, cited in Edwards, 1989, 188) considered these to be Christian domed Qubbas.

Further south, several cemeteries containing Box-Graves have been identified among the thousands of tumuli, but only at Musawwarat and Soba have examples been confirmed as Christian by excavation (Edwards, 1989, 188).

In the Shendi Reach F. Geus noted a dozen cemeteries on the desert fringes of the alluvial plain along the left bank and further seven away from it (Geus 1986, cited in Edwards, 1989, 180). Some graves appear to have been of box-grave types, but

many were small circular tumuli, often juxtaposed within the same cemetery.

In addition to the aforementioned box graves, one of the important discoveries at the eastern limit of the cemetery is a part of sandstone column, 0.52m in diameter which looks similar to that reported in temples and Christian churches in Dongola Reach.



Fig (10), a part of sandstone column at the eastern limit of the cemetery

### **3.2. Wad Beliel cemetery:**

This cemetery takes its name after the name of the famous Skeick Wad Beliel who was buried in Qubba Domed superstructure in the site.

According to different written accounts, (MacMicle 1922, 333; Wad Dayf Allah 1930, 84) and oral traditions, Sheikh Wad Beliel belongs to the Rekkabia tribe, which is a distinguished Arab group that settled in Dongola and then dispersed in Sudan to various places (central, eastern, and

western Sudan). Al Rekkabia belonged to their honorable grandfather Ghulamullah bin Ayed - from the descendants of Hussein bin Ali Ibn Abi Talib - who emigrated from Yemen via the Red Sea and settled in Dongola around the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and taught the local population.

Sheick Wad Beliel was a grandson of Rabat bin Ghulam Allah, the son of Salim, the son of Abdel Razek. Wad Beliel was a relative of Sheick Habib Nassi who taught him Quran and Islamic sciences (Wad Dayf Allah 1930, 84).

The Islamic cemetery of Wad Beliel extends of about 300×250m, and have been used continuously since their foundation until now. The most prominent Islamic feature of the cemetery is the Sheick domed Qubbas. The names of those religious leaders and their burial places are known to the local inhabitants, who still visit them for *barakat* (blessings). They include four Qubbas, namely (Wad Beliel, Abdelrahmaan Abu Tamrah, Ahmed El Aglaan, and Salih Fadul).

The general landscape of Skeick Wad Beliel cemetery, is that the fugara are buried under four Qubba superstructures. Their followers are buried around them in consecutive circles. This cemetery is now continually used, yet the numbers of followers buried around each one of these fugara is very large. The cemetery is now used by the local inhabitants in the area who are from different tribes, Shaigiya, Bederiaa, Hawaier, Busharia and other minorities. All graves in this cemetery are in the right Islamic orientation. Some burials also show some non-Islamic features such as water jugs or food containers. In fact, there is few numbers of pottery sherds on this cemetery.



Fig (11), general view of Wad Beliel cemetery

### 3.2.1. Burials:

There are four types of Islamic burials in Sheick Wad Beliel cemetery which coincided with Soghayroun's (1998) classification:

1. **Ordinary graves:** marked by a low oval tumuli and delimited sometimes with bricks or pebbles. This is the most common type of grave used in the cemetery and in all other Islamic cemeteries in the Sudan (cf. Soghayroun 1998, 99). This type of grave is sometimes delimited with pebble covering, pots and palm fronds. Today almost all graves have inscribed tombstones (shahid). In later periods, iron plates, cement were used as shahid which contained information regarding the dead person, such as his name, family, death date, and some Quran texts, etc. Moreover, there are cemeteries without elaborate tombs, but the graves are often low mounds marked by stones or pebbles occasionally with tombstones.



Fig (12), sample of ordinary tombs at the cemetery

- 2. Mastaba types:** which are used for some Sheicks and people of importance or wealthy families. They are built of red bricks or/and cement of about one meter high (cf. Soghayroun, 1998, 399). The best example of this is that of Zakari the son of Sheick Mohamed Osman El Moubarak.



Fig (13), Mastaba burial of Zakari the son of Sheick Mohamed Osman El Moubarak

- 3. Qubbas for sheicks:** All Gobbas at the study area were of complete capped conical *Gubba* shape except for one which is totally collapsed.

The sizes of the types vary from large to medium, and they are built with mud bricks except that of Sheick Salih Fadul. All Qubbas contain burials, and in some cases, there are more than one burial in individual *Gubba*. Nevertheless, all *Gubbas* occupy prominent places in the grave yard.

There are four domed Qubbas in the Cemetery, and according to the local information, they belong to first, **Wad Beliel** which is oldest one and from which the cemetery takes its name. This Qubba is situated at the middle of the cemetery. Its exact history is not determined, but according to the local population and what have been written in Kitab El Tabagat it is originated from about 17<sup>th</sup> century. The description is as follows:

***Exterior:*** It is a conical shaped structure built of mud. The total height of the *Qubba* is 9 m. Its external diameter is 30 m. The entrance is a medium round arch about 2.50m high and 0.70m wide.

***Interior:*** The diameter is about 6 m giving about 1 m for the thickness of the walls which varies from down to up. The walls seem to have been hollowed out, giving a cavity, which may have been functional to keep the inside cool (cf. Soghayroun, 1998, 399). There is only one burial inside which is determined by two parallel rows of mud-brick.





Fig (14), Qubba domed of Sheik Wad Beliel

The **second** Qubba is that of Sheik Abdulrahman Abu Tamrah, situated at the western part of the cemetery. Its history is not determined but according to its shape it might have been in the same date of that of Sheik Wad Beliel.

**Exterior:** It is a conical shaped structure built of mud-brick which is now in bad preserved condition as a result of erosion. The total height of the *Qubba is* about 7 m. Its external diameter is 21,70m. The entrance is totally collapsed and the thickness of the wall is 0.75m.

**Interior:** The diameter is about 4 m giving about 1.50 m for the thickness of the walls which varies from down to up. As in the first one the walls seem to have been hollowed out. No features appeared inside except only one burial.



Fig (15), Qubba domed of Sheick Abdulrahman Abu Tamrah

The **third** is that of Sheick Ahmed El Aglaan. This Qubba is totally collapsed except for its base and three rows of mud-bricks. Its external diameter is 3.50m.



Fig (16), the remains of Sheick Ahmed El Aglaan Qubba

The **last one** is that of Sheick Salih Fadul who established Khalwa to teach the Quran and Islamic sciences in Mura since 1800 AD according to the oral history.

His Qubba marked the south part of the cemetery. This Qubba has a late history in comparison with other in the cemetery. It is built of red-brick plastered with cement in its upper part and Beig plastered. Its design is coincided with that of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Exterior:** It is a rounded structure topped with a conical shape. The latter consists of an iron bar topped by a crescent. The total height of the *Qubba* is 7 m. Its external diameter is 24.80m. The entrance is a rectangle 1.73m high and 0.60m wide. The thickness of the walls is 0.65m.

**Interior:** The diameter is about 6.50m. There are more than one burial inside the Gubba.



Fig (17), Qubba domed of Sheick Salih Fadul

#### 4. Binaya:

There are four Binayas in the cemetery. The general features of them are: low mud brick building, rectangular in shape and with a mihrab at the center of its eastern wall. Another type which is exactly the same as the first one, except the presence of mihrab. The sizes of Binayas vary from medium to small, and each Binaya has more than one burial.

Example for the first one is that of Sheick El Husain Sid Ahmed El Husain, situated at the north-west side of the

cemetery. It is a rectangular shape built of mud-brick “*Jalous*”. It is 6.70m length, 4.25m width, and 0.80m height, with thickness of 0.25m. The door is 0.80m. Mihrab is situated at the center of its eastern wall with 1.30m width, and 1m length. There are 11 black iron tomb marks inside the Binaya which indicate the existence of more than 5 burials there.



Fig (18), the first type of Binaya, Sheick El Husain Sid Ahmed

The second one represented by that of unknown Sheick situated 5m east of Sheick Abdulrahman Abu Tamrah Qubba. Its 5.50m length and 4m width built of mud “*Jalous*”, there are no traces of entrance since it is totally collapsed except one row of *Jalous*.



Fig (19), the second type of Binaya of unknown Sheick

#### 4. Conclusion:

The survey so far has highlighted the chronological disparity of the study area. Medieval, Post-Medieval sites predominate with less material.

The general lack of sites from other archaeological periods might have been due to the fact that this missing sites remain buried under the encroaching dunes at present, and that earlier sites are more likely to be situated farther into the desert away from the present Nile course (cf. Zurawski and Phillips 1999, 64).

The cemetery of Sheick Wad Beliel is still used, and offers a unique opportunity, to study its development through time i.e. from at least 17<sup>th</sup> century, to present. A close examination of development of this cemetery shows a decline in the rigorous adherence to Islamic burial customs which seems to have been practiced during the Shickes era. The early graves around *Gubbas* are very simple with flat surfaces and a line of stone on the outer limits of the grave. The more recent graves

have developed to become rather complex with a superstructure of earth and decorative line of stone or bricks.

The study documented different types of archaeological features in Wad Beliel cemetery, which includes four types of burials; Ordinary graves, *Gubbas*, Mastaba, and Binaya.

The common cemetery in Mura, which is an extension to the *fugara* cemetery, to its east limit, shows a mixture of Islamic and non-Islamic graves. This becomes clear when an examination of the orientation of the graves is done. Those which are laid north-south i.e. The Islamic ones, constitute a very high percentage, yet many graves are either laid east-west or in irregular orientation. The existence of normal Christian box graves at this cemetery built of red brick shows an early date of the site. Although, the existence of box grave cemeteries besides Islamic cemeteries seems very important since its evident that rare sites were reported belongs to the transition phase between Christian and Islamic periods in the Sudan. Besides, the discovery of a block of Sandstone column suggests existence of a church or associated building which might lay beneath the abandoned village houses. Future studies can investigate in detail the source of this block whether it is a church or administrative building.

Finally, the present study is just preliminary notes on medieval and Post-Medieval archaeology in the study area. No doubt that more archaeological investigation in the site of Sheick Wad Beliel, Fugrara cemetery and other Islamic sites of the same period, will give us more information on the process of Islamization in the Sudan.

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