Hans-Peter Wotzka (ed.), Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Archaeology of the Fourth Nile Cataract, University of Cologne, 13–14 July 2006. *Africa Praehistorica* 22 (Köln: Heinrich-Barth-Institut), 2012: 303–310.

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Prehistoric sites on Mograt Island

Abstract

Numerous prehistoric sites were found during survey work on Mograt, the largest of the Nile islands. Evidence of prehistoric occupation dates to the Palaeolithic, Neolithic and Kerma periods. The Kerma remains are the easternmost occurrence of this culture so far known. Excavation of a Palaeolithic site produced numerous stone artefacts in sediment layers, among them several Levallois cores.

Keywords: Fourth Nile Cataract · Palaeolithic · Neolithic · Kerma period

Introduction

Mograt is situated in the Abu Hamed Reach in the north of the Sudan, in the great river bend where the Nile turns to the southwest. The island is approximately 30 km long and 6 km wide and is characterised in its western part by large terraces of Nile gravels and by a rocky plateau of granite and diorite in its southeastern part. These two parts are divided by a palaeo-channel of the Nile **(Fig. 1)**.

Although Mograt is the largest island in the River Nile, prior to 2006 no archaeological excavation had ever taken place at this location. This is all the more surprising since as early as the early 19th century Cailliaud and Linant de Bellefonds mention a fortress at Karmel in their travel reports (SHINNIE 1958). Several researchers visited Mograt Island and small surveys were carried out, but their work usually focused on the various fortifications and Christian remains, especially the churches (JACKSON 1926; CRAWFORD 1953; AHMED 1971). Most visitors allude to the rock engravings at Es-Sihan which are, however, difficult to date. Only Else Johansen Kleppe reports on a few prehistoric sites, two of which she assigned to the Neolithic (KLEPPE 1982).

Despite this apparent lack of investigations, the island has much to offer to the prehistorian. This became clear during the H.U.N.E. 2006 survey of the island, when numerous prehistoric sites were identified. Some preliminary results of the survey and excavations are presented here (for the later periods see also NÄSER, this volume).

Survey

The survey was organised in two steps: fieldwalking followed by car survey. Initially, an intensive foot survey was undertaken in the surroundings of the base camp at Karmel village, which is situated on the left bank in the southeastern part of the island. The main aim of this survey was to investigate the rocky ridges and hills of the plateau east of Karmel **(Fig. 2)**.

A total of 32 sites were located, some of which have multiple occupation phases (counted as 'sites' below):

- 9 Palaeolithic sites, ranging from single finds to artefact scatters;
- 19 Neolithic sites with scatters of potsherds and artefacts;
- 14 cemeteries of different ages, from the Kerma period to the Christian medieval era;
- 1 site featuring wedge marks of uncertain date.

An example of a Palaeolithic site is MOG022, situated next to what appears to be a Napatan cemetery

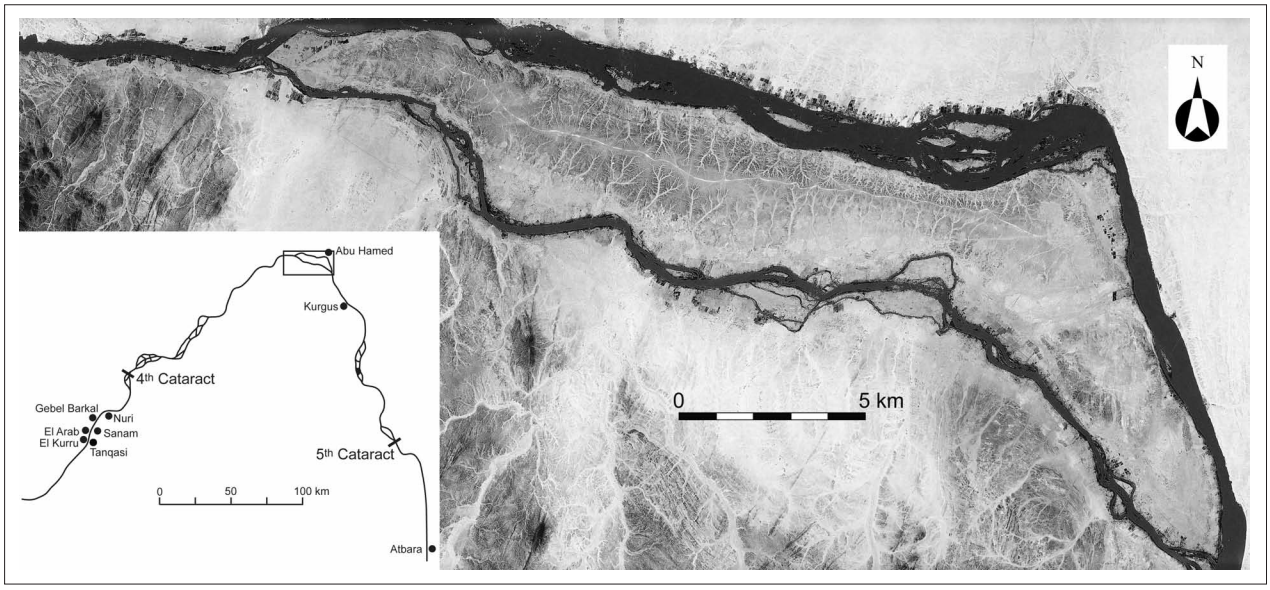

Fig. 1 Corona satellite image of Mograt Island.

on a ridge overlooking a wadi. Here, loosely scattered Palaeolithic artefacts are intermingled with some concentrations of Neolithic stone artefacts. Among the pieces collected for analysis are several Levallois cores which show preparational scars and negatives of the end-products. Another site, MOG024, is located at the foot of a hill, below the plateau. It produced concentrations of artefacts which may represent knapping areas of unknown date. Additionally, individual Levallois cores were found dispersed over the surface of the site. These examples illustrate that Palaeolithic artefacts are not found embedded in sediments and, judging from admixtures of Neolithic finds, the preservation of these early sites is not particularly good.

Similar observations were made with regard to Neolithic sites. For example, at site MOG013, on the plateau above Karmel, Neolithic finds are scattered around tumuli of presumed Napatan age for the most part, but some medieval pottery is also found. At site MOG014, a number of loosely set stone circles were discovered along with Neolithic sherds. Unfortunately, the preservation of the site is so poor that no connection between the structures and the finds can be demonstrated on the basis of the surface evidence.

As for the Kerma period, the situation is drastically different. Instead of dispersed settlement remains we now find extensive cemeteries, some involving very large tumuli. For example, the largest and best-preserved tumulus of site MOG034 has a diameter of 15.5 m and is still 65 cm high. The central part of the superstructure is loosely covered with debris of white quartz, while the outer ring consists of dark granite rocks, producing a rather impressive contrast **(Fig. 3)**. This tumulus was the only one in the cemetery that had been partly covered with white quartz. Thus, it contrasted with all other tumuli (constructed exclusively from black stones) not only because of its its size but also due to its ornamentation. Furthermore, it is situated at the highest position of the hill upon which the cemetery is located, while all other tumuli were placed upon its flanks or at its foot. The second-largest tumulus is 14.5 m in diameter and still stands to a height of 80 cm. The remaining tumuli are significantly smaller, ranging from 3.5 to 11 m in diameter. The total number of superstructures at this site amounts to eleven.

The presence on Mograt of Kerma culture remains is of great interest as they extend the known distribution area of this culture even further eastwards. Only recently, surveys and excavations conducted within the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project resulted in the identification of a large number of Kerma sites in the region of the Fourth Nile Cataract, downstream from, i.e. to the west of, Mograt Island (e.g. PANER 2003: 16–18).

Fig. 2 Landscape of the survey area in the vicinity of Karmel village, with irrigated fields on alluvial terraces in the foreground and rocky plateau in the background. In the centre, the Christian cemetery MOG001 is being excavated.

Fig. 3 Tumulus of the Kerma period (MOG034, feature 1).

Fig. 4 Rock engravings with depictions of elephants at Es-Sihan.

Following the completion of the foot survey a more extensive survey by car was untertaken so as to gain an overview of the archaeology of Mograt Island. While a large number of findspots were only recorded using GPS, without further examination, another 26 sites were inspected more closely. Several of these showed Palaeolithic finds or Neolithic artefact scatters. Other places visited are the rock art site of Es-Sihan and some of the fortresses, which had already been published earlier by JACKSON (1926) and CRAWFORD (1953). Furthermore, 13 cemeteries, again ranging from Kerma times to the Christian era, were recorded as were a number of Christian settlement sites.

Most impressive and quite well-preserved are the rock engravings at Es-Sihan **(Fig. 4)**, which show different motifs such as humans, boats, cattle, birds, Christian symbols and Arabic inscriptions. While dating the engravings is clearly a difficult task, I would like to suggest at least the possibility that some petroglyphs, which appear to depict elephants, might date to the phase of the early to middle Holocene climatic optimum during which the landscape was still more favourably vegetated.

In the interior of the island the landscape is characterised by a large plain of Nile pebbles that covers most of its surface **(Fig. 5)**. Closer examination of these pebble terraces revealed ubiquitous stone artefacts, presumably from various periods, forming a seemingly endless scatter of occupational debris stretching over kilometres. However, in most places it would be misleading to speak of real concentrations. This situation is indicative of the heavy impact of erosion.

Near the village of Gereif, on the southern side of the west end of Mograt, habitation remains were found at site MOG061. The site yielded a scatter of sherds **(Fig. 6)** and stone artefacts dated to the Kerma period, but again, it suffered so much from erosion that very little archaeology remains.

Unfortunately, after the third day of the survey the mission's car broke down and we were forced to

Fig. 5 An impression of the gravel terrace in the western part of the island.

cease our survey activities before we were able to cover the entire island. Therefore, the survey's results only represent a sample of sites from the island, namely those recorded in the areas of more intensive survey, a fact clearly reflected in the overall site distribution map **(Fig. 7)**.

However, judging from the number of prehistoric sites found, it soon became clear that the potential of Mograt Island for prehistoric research is much higher than one would have expected on the basis of the available literature. The question was just how much these eroded, badly preserved surface scatters of artefacts could contribute to our understanding of the island's prehistory.

Excavation at site MOG024

In pursuit of an answer it was decided to begin with a closer examination of some of the prehistoric sites in the vicinity of the missions's base camp at Karmel. Site MOG024 was chosen for excavation, because a number of Levallois cores had been found there in a relatively small area of the plain at the foot of a hill.

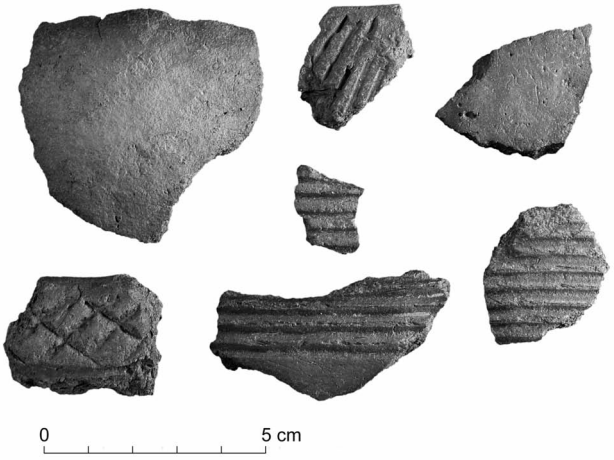

Fig. 6 Kerma period pottery sherds from site MOG061.

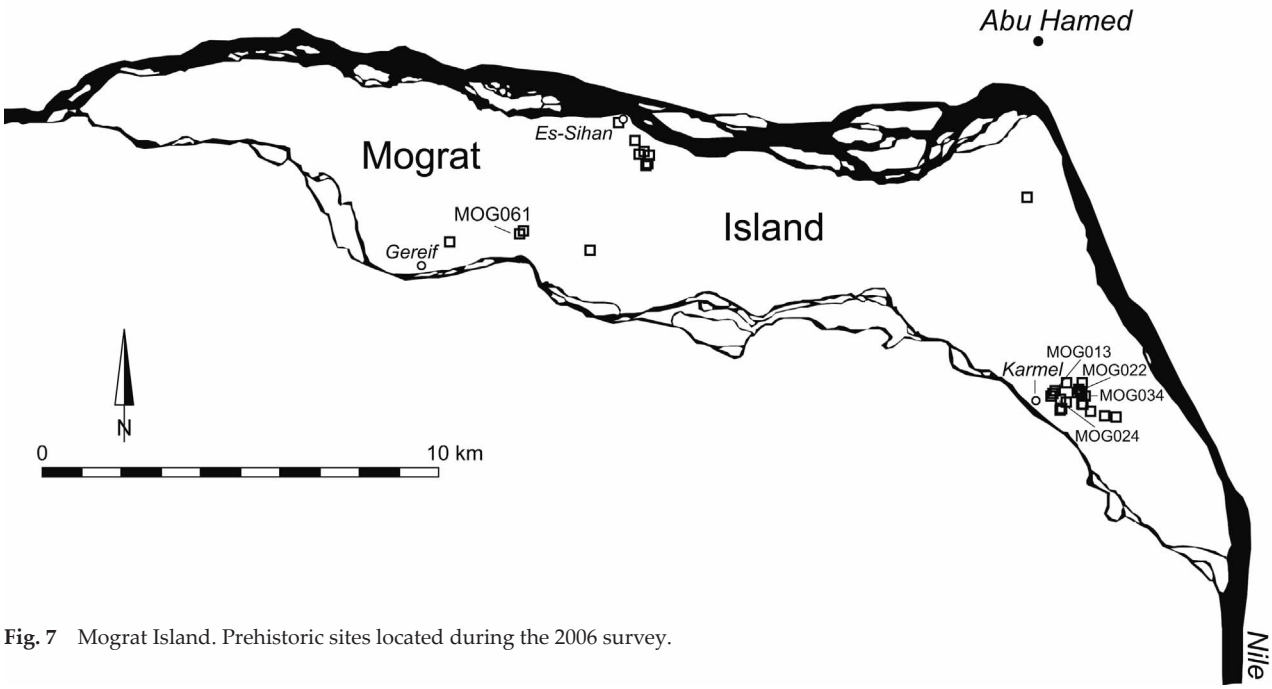

Fig. 7 Mograt Island. Prehistoric sites located during the 2006 survey.

Fig. 8 Situation at site MOG024 during excavation, looking south. The geological trench is on the right, the excavation area MOG024A on the left.

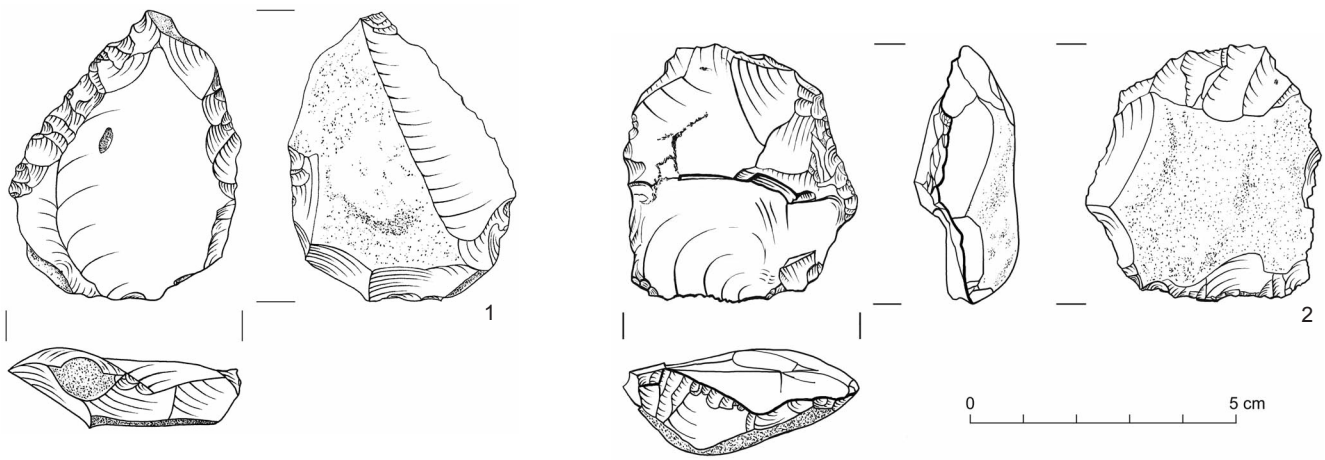

Fig. 9 Two Levallois cores excavated at MOG024A.

However, the preservation conditions on the surface were relatively poor, as the area was dissected by erosion channels coming down from the hill and also by some donkey tracks.

The excavation of a geological trench provided an insight into the lateral variation of the sediment layers towards the hill **(Fig. 8)**. The area of archaeological excavation (MOG024A) was small, initially only three square metres. After a few days this area was enlarged by another metre square in order to follow a probable artefact concentration at the southern edge of the original trench.

Two cores found in the sediment are worth describing in more detail: The first is a flake with the negative of a detached end-product on its ventral side, reminiscent of the Kombewa method of flake production **(Fig. 9,1)**. The piece had later been modified into a scraper by a retouch of its lateral edges. Another core was found 15 cm deeper in the same square. This piece shows a circumferential preparation of its flaking surface and the typical preparation of the striking platform together with a convex upper (flaking) surface **(Fig. 9,2)**. Thus, in this case, it is warranted to speak of a typical Levallois core. However, in spite of a careful preparation, at least the final end-product failed, it becoming stuck halfway along the upper surface; this was probably caused by natural inclusions in the raw material.

The trench was dug down until bed-rock was reached at a depth of 40–50 cm. The section **(Fig. 10)** shows the diorite bed-rock covered by a thick layer of weathered diorite rubble with sand. As the stone artefacts recovered from this layer have rather fresh, sharp edges the layer is probably *in situ* and not

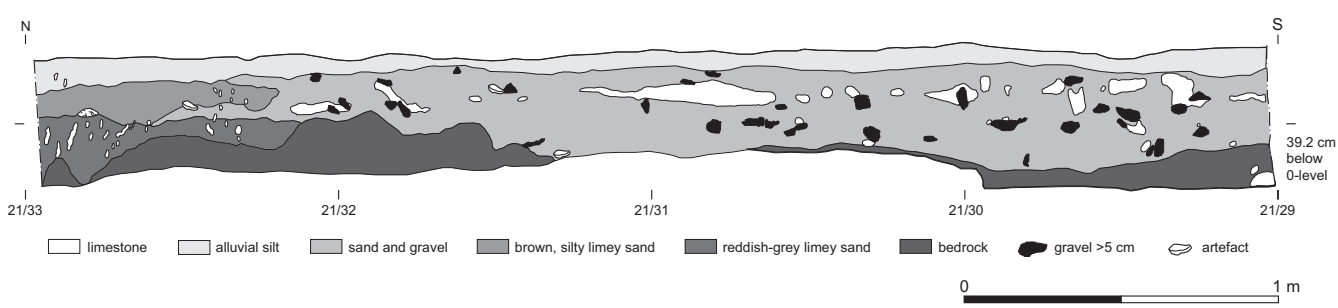

Fig. 10 Eastern section of trench MOG024A.

redeposited, which would have caused more intensive edge wear. Numerous inclusions of limestone point to the possibility that the site might once have been situated close to the shore-line of the Nile, which today lies *c*. 400 m to the southwest and some 15 m lower. The top-most layer, 5–10 cm thick, comprises a clayey silt and was probably washed in by a flash-flood, which, according to local inhabitants, occurred in the year 1976.

The total number of artefacts found is 454, including a third Levallois core and two Levallois flakes. The remainder of the inventory comprises chips, flakes, angular debris, and irregular cores, with many pieces made of quartz. A more detailed analysis of the finds is pending, although their large number in relation to the small surface area of the test trench indicates intensive local activity by prehistoric humans. However, taking into account that the artefacts were found scattered over the whole depth of the trench, they may well have accumulated over a long period of time.

Conclusion

To sum up, it should be stressed that a systematic investigation of some of the apparently numerous prehistoric sites on Mograt Island could contribute significantly to our understanding of the regional prehistory, although frequently site preservation is poor. A first significant result of recent survey work on the island is the identification of a major eastward extension of the Kerma distribution area. As for the Palaeolithic, confirmation of the age (Middle or Late Palaeolithic) of the lithics found at the earliest sites is still lacking. Nevertheless, regardless of their exact chronological affinity, seeing that the Middle to Late Palaeolithic sequence in the Sudan is still far from established, and the number of pertinent sites south of the Second Cataract remains small, continued investigation on the island could prove extremely worthwhile for these prehistoric periods. This is all the more true with regard to the ongoing discussion as to the origin of modern humans and the 'Out of Africa' hypothesis.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Cornelia Kleinitz for her comments on a draft version of this paper.

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