

# DONGOLA REACH

## THE SOUTHERN DONGOLA REACH SURVEY REPORT ON FIELDWORK IN 2000

Bogdan Żurawski

*The Southern Dongola Reach Survey (SDRS) is a joint project of the Research Center for Mediterranean Archaeology of the Polish Academy of Sciences and the National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums of the Republic of Sudan, inaugurated in 1997 and supported by the Polish Center of Archaeology of Warsaw University, the Research Center for Mediterranean Archaeology and the Poznań Archaeological Museum. On January 24, 2000, the team took to the field to carry out the third season of fieldwork. The survey and excavation work on both banks of the river between Ed-Diffar and Ez-Zuma were completed on March 14, 2000.<sup>1)</sup>*

1) The SDRS 2000 team headed by the author included: Ms Joanna Kociankowska, archaeologist and documentalist; Mr. Piotr Osypiński, archaeologist (lithics); Mr. Kazimierz Kotlewski, archaeologist and photographer. The staff was aided by a small but efficient group of students of archaeology comprising Ms Edyta Klimaszewska, Mr. Maciej Kurcz and Mr. Bartłomiej Malec. The National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) was represented by senior inspector Mr. Mahmoud Suleyman, whose professional competence and assistance were the mission's most prized assets. Dr. Adam Łajtar's brief visit was put to good account in the copying of the graffiti from the so-called Anachorite Grotto in Ez-Zuma. Mr. Marcin Kydryński recorded on film the Mission's travails.

The most cordial thanks to Heidelberg Polska for a contribution that helped to keep body and soul together while in Sudan.

## THE SURVEY

This season a total of 254 sites was recorded in the concession area on the right bank between Ed-Diffar and Khor Mahafour. Reconnoitering and documentary activities in the Ez-Zuma region were carried out under special permission from the NCAM,<sup>2)</sup> as was the aerial photographing of the Ghazali monastery. The rescue operations in the Usli tumuli field and the Usli temple were occasioned by a road construction project that included the laying of an underground cable by the Sudan telecommunications company.

The team focused on documenting the mediaeval fortresses in the concession area: the strongholds in Abkur (Istabel), Ed-Diffar, Bakhit, Ed-Deiga and the fortified enclosures in Banganarti (Sinada) and Selib. General plans were also prepared of the tumuli fields in Ez-Zuma and Jebel El-Aalim, as well as of the Christian cemetery in Bukibul and the so-called Anachorite Grotto in Ez-Zuma.

The documentary activities in the Ez-Zuma tumuli field gave occasion to a revisiting of the Anachorite Grotto that Lepsius had believed marked the site of an ancient quarry. The Grotto had been visited in the past by several scholars and travelers, the best (unpublished) drawing having been made by J.G. Wilkinson and the best descriptions coming from Lepsius and Monneret de Villard. The graffiti and

inscriptions that still cover the walls of the Grotto were now copied.

The area of Ez-Zuma had been densely populated in Christian times. The huge early Christian fortress seen by Lepsius in 1844 has since been dismantled by the local population, but the scarce post-Meroitic ceramic scatter on the tumuli field is still greatly contaminated with Christian sherds. The fortress mentioned by Lepsius was called Karat Negil after “*an old king of the land*”.<sup>3)</sup> The structural details of the fortress that Lepsius speaks of, such as huge unworked stones forming the wall substructure, are strongly suggestive of an Early Christian provenance.<sup>4)</sup> Huge post-Meroitic tumuli located west of the settlement bear evidence of an even earlier dating.<sup>5)</sup> The only proof of the existence of the fortress nowadays is oral testimony. The structure is totally walled in by modern houses. A complete bronze scimitar brought to the NCAM headquarters in Khartoum in May 2000 is said to come from the tumuli field at Ez-Zuma.

The dating and appropriation of the “quarry” in Ez-Zuma, where the so-called Anachorite Grotto was installed in Christian times, remains a mystery. The Ez-Zuma tumuli, despite the exaggerated term “pyramids” that Lepsius and others used to describe them, are built of earth and gravel (with some unworked stones in

2) The area between Mahafour and Ez-Zuma was surveyed by the Italian Mission under Irena Liverani Vincentelli. The SDRS team restricted its activities to the site of Ez-Zuma.

3) R. Lepsius, *Briefe aus Aegypten, Aethiopien und der Halbinsel des Sinai* (Berlin 1852), 248.

4) The toponym could have something in common with the Greek word *τό ζῶμα* denoting “that which is girded” – a most fitting name for a town “girded” by walls.

5) The survey carried out in Ez-Zuma in February 2000 brought to light a scatter of Early to Classic Christian ceramics that is also present among the tumuli.

the core). The fortress, according to Lepsius' description and all known analogies, was built of mudbrick and unworked ferrogenous sandstone. All the Kushite religious and sepulchral centers known today – the most plausible recipient of quarried blocks – are situated too far away from this would-be quarry.

The Ez-Zuma quarry, if at all, could have supplied the stone needed for building the local Early Christian churches that must have been erected in a region as densely populated and as important, both strategically and economically, as Ez-Zuma.<sup>6)</sup>

A comparison of modern views of the Ez-Zuma tumuli with air photos taken by the RAF in the 1930s reveals the alarming pace of deterioration occurring on the mounds. Even so, of the “*more than 30 mounds*” seen by Lepsius in 1844, at least 30 can still be located.

The ceramic scatter on the tumuli field points to the very late post-Meroitic period (overlapping the Christian period in

Nubia) as a plausible date for raising the mounds. Seventy percent of the much-eroded sherds belongs to the Early Christian repertoire.

While no probes were carried out in the Ez-Zuma tumuli field in 2000, the remains of some curious masonry(?) structures were noticed on the western sides of the bigger mounds. These would-be mortuary chapels, now reduced to shapeless heaps, were made of mudbricks and white sandstone of local origin. The Ez-Zuma tumuli field is very close to the traditional Kushite burial grounds of El Kurru and Gebel Barkal. Another possible attempt at the imitation of their Kushite predecessors by the post-Meroites in the burial mounds is also discernible in the slender, steep walls of the Ez-Zuma tumuli, which have an internal stone support and a distinctive outer stone coating. These features, definitely better preserved during Lepsius' visit, might have misled him into describing the Ez Zuma tumuli as “pyramids”.

## THE TEMPLE AT HUGAIR GUBLI

Two religious buildings from the Kushite period that were brought to light by fieldwork carried out this season add to what has been learned from the previously investigated temple of Soniyat. This discovery fully corroborates the information given in the late 7th cent. BC enthronement stele of King Anlamani, who: “(*...*) *sailed northwards in the second month of Winter, (re)founding each district, doing good for every god, giving rewards to the prophets and (pri)ests of every temple-compound*

*at which he arrived. Every district was in a state of rejoicing on meeting him, shouting, thanking god, and bowing down. He reached “Finding-(the)-At(on)” in the month 2 of Winter, day 29.*<sup>7)</sup>

The “*temple-compound*” possibly visited by Anlamani was found in the hamlet of Huguir Gubli, in a fertile and densely populated district downriver from the Bakhit fortress. A green belt of cultivation begins there and continues until El Arak, where the Ed-Deiga fortress guards the

6) There are no typical quarrying marks in the would-be quarries in Ez-Zuma. The so-called Anachorite Grotto was to all purposes a chapel hewn in the rock face rather than a void left over from quarrying building stone.

7) Fontes Historiae Nubiorum I (34, 7-8), 219.



*Fig. 1. Huger Gubli village. Outlines of Kushite temple foundations seen from the air  
(Photo B. Żurawski)*



*Fig. 2. Foundation blocks of the Kushite temple in Huger Gubli  
(Photo B. Żurawski)*

narrow gorge between the mountain ridge and the river. The region comprises the important districts of El-Araak, Hugeir and Magal. A motorable desert shortcut going to Kawa and Old Dongola bisects the region.

Hugeir is quite favorably located at the end of the desert shortcut just opposite the fertile Nile islands of Masawi and Umm el-Suyuf. In the Christian period, this region of great economical importance was guarded at both ends by two enormous fortresses, Bakhit and Ed-Deiga. In later times, the Ed-Deiga fortress stood on the border between Dar Shayikija and Dar Dongola.

The temple in question was concealed within a maze of Hugeir houses (*Figs. 1, 2*). The biggest remaining part of it sits in the hosh of Ali Abd Er-Rahim. The yard is fenced off from the river terrace by a dike constructed during the last record flood in 1998. Ali Abd Er-Rahim reported that during the high floods he used to moor his felucca there. Some blocks bearing traces of polychrome decoration and would-be hieroglyphs were found among the blocks used for constructing the dike.

The temple sits on terraced rocky ground facing the river. The size of the foundation blocks and the diameter of the column bases suggests an edifice of considerable dimensions. The diameter of a column base still *in situ* is 180 cm. A disconnected and misplaced half base, found on the embankment, approached 250 cm in diameter. The bases were formed of two semicircular sections clamped together.

The megalithic foundation blocks were cut out of well-dressed local sandstone. A T-shaped block, forming part of a naos, measured 280 x 260 cm. Its thickness is unknown, as the side wall could not be exposed deeper than 60 cm. The blocks

were laid directly on bedrock. The biggest blocks were found beneath the walls at intersections, which were the most strained elements in the building. On the basis of the elements recorded on the surface and in a layer 10 cm below, a highly hypothetical plan of the temple could be drawn.

A very thorough search for ceramics around the temple failed to produce any evidence of occupation before the Christian period. The left bank of the Nile was duly visited in search of a settlement, especially in view of rumors about stone statues having been found by road builders on the left bank opposite Hugeir. However, the most appealing story concerned the finding of a bronze figurine near the Muslim graveyard in Usli (exactly opposite Hugeir). To judge by the description, the figure could be an image of the goddess Bastet or Sachmet (the present owner of the figure could not be traced).

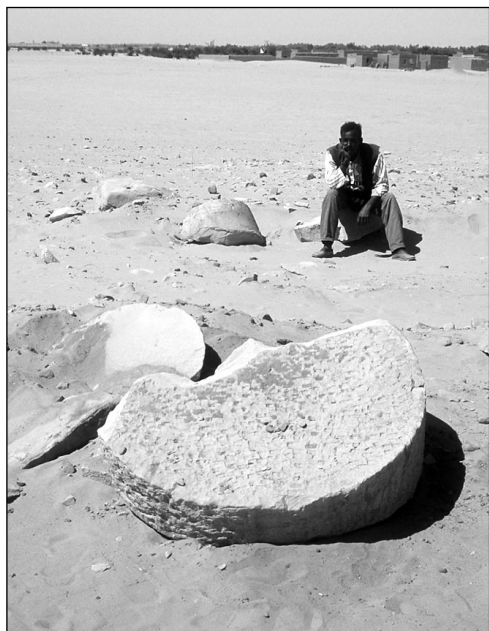
A cursory reconnaissance of the region around the graveyard in Usli was promptly rewarded with the discovery of another temple of more moderate size, but in a far better state of preservation. As at Hugeir all stone, wall and drum measurements were multiples of the Egyptian royal cubit. Column drum diameters and wall widths equaled 105 cm (*Fig. 3*), while blocks were mostly 52.5 x 105 cm. The topmost layers around the temple yielded a rich scatter of Kushite ceramics with a conspicuous admixture of imported Egyptian cream marl wares. The bread moulds found so far (Dia. 8-12 cm) come from the Eighteenth to Twentieth Dynasties and the Napatan series. The would-be Kushite statues appeared to be of modern date. According to mixed and contradictory local testimonies, they were sculpted 20 or 30 years ago by an Usli villager. However, the repertoire of these

sculptures is astonishing. They represent motifs that might have been inspired by Egyptian-Kushite iconography. Reliefs, sculptures and murals seen among the ruins could have been a source of inspiration for the Usli sculptor. This is made even more plausible, considering that the temple was quarried for stone until modern times. Some column drums reveal traces of recutting, e.g. a drum made into a millstone.

The story of the discovery of a Bastet/Sekhmet figurine, in some way perhaps authenticated by the discovery of a Kushite temple in exactly the same spot, brings to mind the toponym Cadata/Radata known from Bion's list in Pliny's "Natural History", where a golden cat was worshipped. The place is usually identified with

Tare, known from the Harsjotef Annals, year 35, and from the stele of Nastasen.

The assumption that Usli is Tare makes more sense than one might expect and makes the fragments of the Harsjotef and Nastasen stelae more comprehensible. The temple complex of Amun of Tara (on) ensi, where Harsjotef was instructed to "go down"<sup>8)</sup>, might be the huge temple in Hugerir that sits directly on the opposite bank. Harsjotef might easily have gone down to it as the text says, since it is situated on a bank that is markedly lower than the high bank in Usli. Plausibly, the mammoth temple in Hugerir might be dedicated to Amun. If the identification is correct, then we shall have a most precise date for the completion of the Hugerir temple.



*Fig. 3. Column drums of the Usli temple  
(Photo B. Żurawski)*

8) Fontes Historiae Nubiorum II (78, 23), 443.

In another place in the Annals, Harsjotef states that he: “*built Tara, one side being 50 cubits, making four sides, cubits 200, as well*”.<sup>9)</sup> As no excavations have been conducted on the site, nothing can be said concerning the real size of the Usli buildings. The square shape rather precludes a temple. It might reasonably be a palace of moderate size, the more so that the building of Tare by Harsjotef is listed together with repair works done by him in the royal palace at Napata.

Tare is also referred to in the stele of Nastasen from year 8 of his reign. Nastasen on the 24th day of the month “*went up to Bastet who dwells in Tele (=Tare), his good mother who gave him life, a long beautiful old age, and her left breast*”.<sup>10)</sup> On the 29th day of the month, he was in Napata. This means that going either up or down between Napata and Tare, including the making of offerings, took five days, and a visit in Tare, on the way upstream from Pnubs and Kawa during a journey to Napata, lasted the same amount of time.

The location of Usli satisfies both situations, since the site sits on the left bank of the river, 35 km south of Napata. It must be noted that during the winter months, the distance from Usli to Napata was covered overland due to reverse winds and current on the river. The second mention of Tare in the Nastasen stele is connected with the war with the rebel Mediye (Medjaj) who sacked the “*property consisting of things that come to Bastet who dwells in Tarae, a foundation of king Aspelta*”.<sup>11)</sup> This means that the temple existed during Aspelta's time, if it was not founded by him. Last but not least,

R(h)adata is listed by Bion as lying next, and on the opposite bank, to Coetum (identified as Kereten). Were Kereten to be identified with Tergedum in Sonijat, then topographical reality would appear to concur with the textual record.

Contrary to the rather barren Hugeir region, the environs of Usli were densely populated throughout the Kushite period. South of the temple there are huge Christian koms and desertwards there sits a huge tumuli field that had been devastated by road construction among other things. Luckily, two complete jars were recovered from the inhabitants of Usli. One brownish burnished jar, 36 cm in diameter, was decorated with an incised zigzag band on the shoulder (*Fig. 4*, top right), the other, with a diameter exceeding 42 cm, bore a mat impression. One endangered tumulus, situated next to a *gabwa* place, was excavated under the supervision of NCAM inspector Mahmoud Suleyman. The rescue operation revealed a hypogeum with a side niche of oval shape and a subrectangular entrance shaft. To judge by the trail of beads that usually adorned the corpse, the body must have been dragged out by robbers through a hole made in the entrance blocking. The grave furnishings were left virtually intact. One pot was discovered filled with small pebbles. In another, 300 or so faience beads were found.

The ceramics from the tumuli field in Usli produced a very interesting assemblage unknown from hitherto excavated post-Meroitic tumuli on the right bank (*Fig. 5*). Some ornaments and shapes are analogous to ceramics of the 2nd

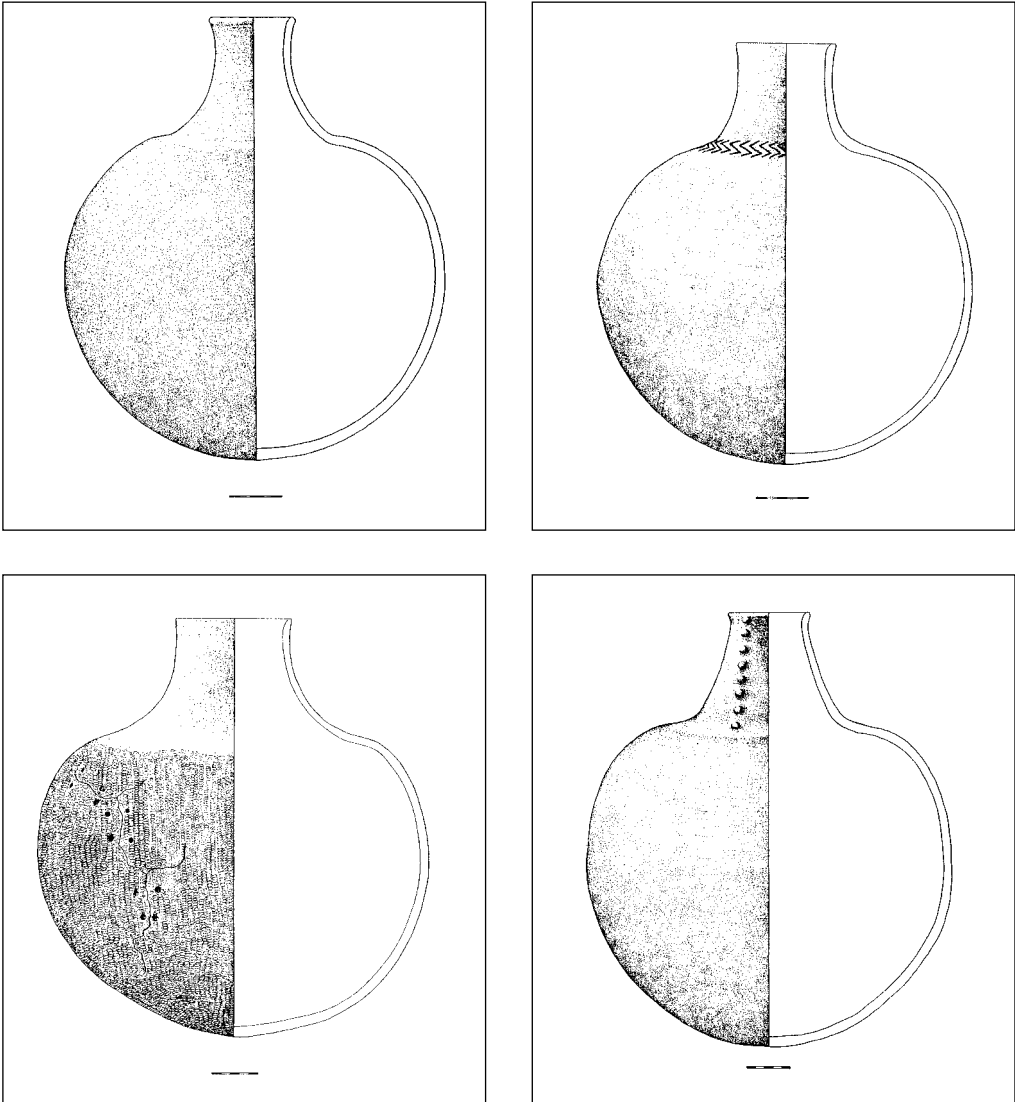
9) Ibid., (78, 131-132), 455.

10) Ibid., (84, 33), 483.

11) Ibid., (84, 181-182) 493.

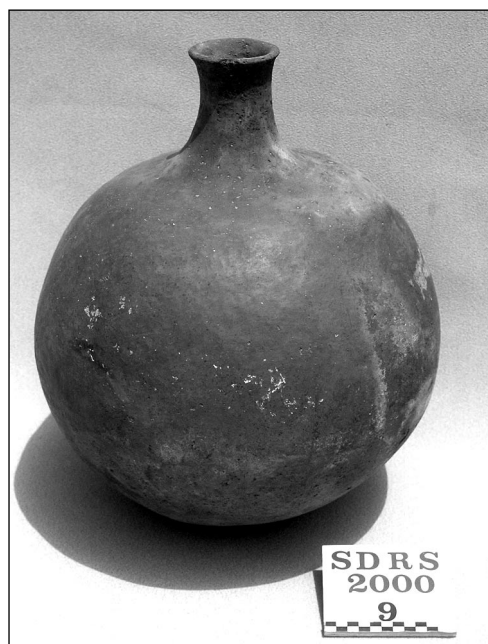
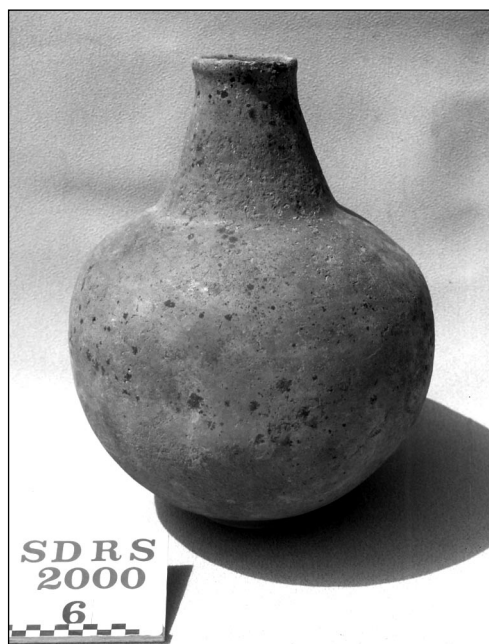
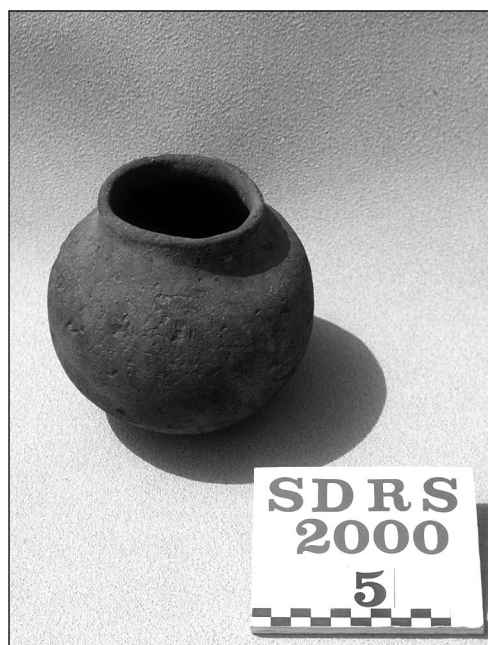
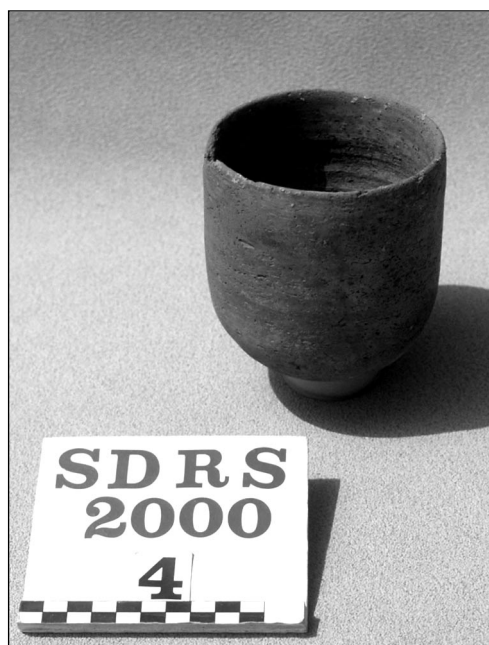
and 3rd cent. AD or even earlier. Usli pots are as a rule of better quality and larger in size. One red-ware jar with an outer diameter of 42 cm had two rows of 8 knobs on each side of the neck (cf. *Fig. 4*, bottom

right). Some fragments of mat-impressed bowls suggest forms of more than 50 cm in diameter. A characteristic feature seems to be relief decoration done with a rocker stamp.



*Fig. 4. Beer jars from the Meroitic/post Meroitic cemetery at Usli. SDRS 7/2000 (top left), 8/2000 (top right), 10/2000 (bottom left), 11/2000 (bottom right) (Drawing B. Zurawski, P. Terendy)*





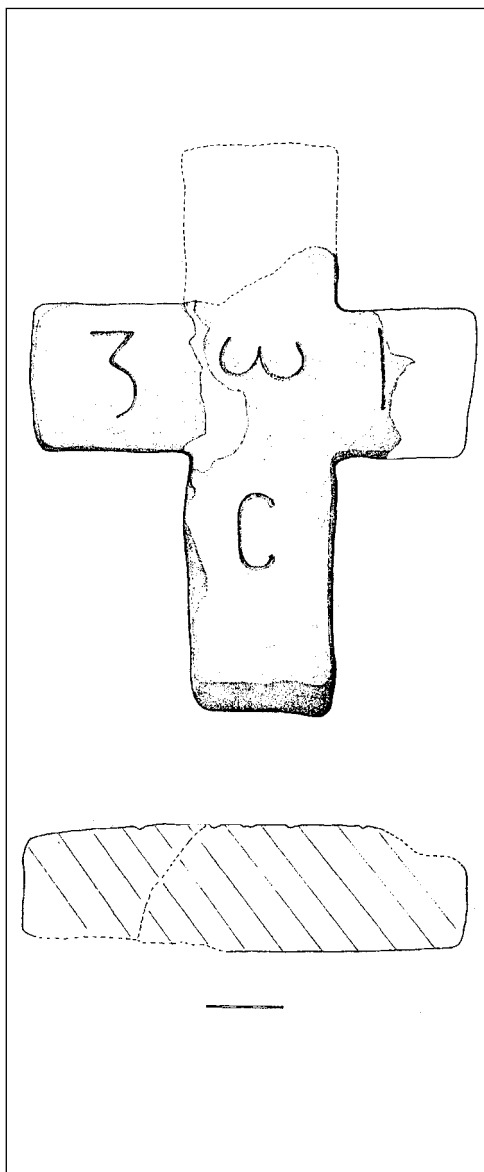
*Fig. 5. Ceramics from the Meroitic/post-Meroitic cemetery at Usli  
(Photo B. Żurawski)*

## AERIAL PHOTO DOCUMENTATION PROJECT

The aerial archaeology program was continued with Ed-Diffar, Ghazali, Selib, Jebel el-Aalim sites being photographed from a camera suspended on a kite. The photographs once scanned and processed, revealed some interesting details concerning the original layout of the first of the sites mentioned above. Ed-Diffar turned out to have been a fortified town with an evidently unprotected riverside (as in Old Dongola and Bakhit). In similarity to the Ed-Deiga fortress, there was an Upper Castle situated inside the city.

A detailed survey of Bakhit, Ed-Deiga and Abkor made a periodization into rebuilding phases possible. The fortress in Bakhit was constructed originally as a trapezoid with slender elongated bastions incorporated into the walls. The extensive damages inflicted upon the longer walls necessitated the construction of bigger bastions against the existing walls. The biggest ones screened the slot-like openings in the walls that earlier had been left unprotected in a manner resembling the so-called "sally gates" of Byzantine fortifications. The evidence recorded in Ed-Deiga and Bakhit proves that the "sally gates" in Nubian architecture were either abandoned or their number was reduced during the early Christian period. Reconnoitering on foot around the Bakhit fortress produced a sandstone sepulchral cross (*Fig. 6*).

Finally, measurements effected in the Ed-Deiga fortress this season, combined with aerial photographs taken in 1998 and Wilkinson's drawing of the fortress done in 1848, made a complete reconstruction of its original layout possible.



*Fig. 6. Sepulchral cross from the Christian cemetery in Bakhit (SDRS 1/2000)  
(Drawing B. Żurawski, P. Terendy)*