

■ SUDAN

Palaeolithic sites at El-Multaga, Sudan

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Purposes

The Multaga-Abu Dom area is located along the left bank of the Nile valley between the modern towns of Ed Debba to the west, and Korti to the east. It is included in the programme of archeological site salvage of the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project at the 4th Cataract of the river Nile. The area is going to be almost entirely occupied by one of the resettlements of the inhabitants of the 4th Cataract at El-Multaga. The resettlement area includes two villages and administrative premises for agricultural cultivations. It is expected to be occupied by the dislocated population by the end of 2003.

An archeological survey was carried out in the Multaga-Abu Dom area at the beginning of 2002 by the French Archeological Section (*Section Française de la Direction des Antiquités du Soudan - SFDAS*) in collaboration with the Sudanese National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, under the Merowe Dam Project Implementation Unit. Palaeolithic sites were identified in remnants of Pleistocene deposits that appeared on the present surface after various erosional phases during the Late Pleistocene, as well as the Holocene until present times. These Pleistocene deposits were preserved between two wadis perpendicular to the Nile that cut the southern terrace above the present course of the river. They are located about 5 km south of the left Nile bank, at the second bend of the river.

A quick test pit was immediately dug by P. Van Peer in order to assess if an archaeological deposit was preserved in the sub-surface. Van Peer recognised the existence of sediments with artifacts and encouraged the continuation of rescue fieldwork,

which was assigned to the present author thanks to an invitation of Francis Geus, director of the French Archeological Section, and to a grant from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The purposes of the research were: a review of the Palaeolithic sites identified in the previous survey and mapped by GPS receivers; general observation of their features; assessment of their archaeological potential in terms of stratigraphy and artifactual material; excavation of sondages in order to ascertain the archaeological value of the sites; description of the depositional formations; detailed analysis of the lithic industries included in the excavated deposits; reconstruction of the chaîne opératoire of the reduction techniques; typological classification of the lithic assemblages; cultural attribution to specific contexts known in the region; and a general interpretation of the cultural techno-complexes.

Methods

The Palaeolithic sites that had been previously identified and mapped were re-inspected. They were described according to their geographic features, extension, presence of artifacts on the surface, and sub-surface archaeological potential. Four sites were selected for test excavation. The sondages were N-S oriented and measured 2 x 1 m. The most promising appeared to be the ones on slightly elevated hills and those with large cobbles or outcrops of Hudi chert, a yellow-reddish fine grained rock locally available in the Dongola Reach area (cf. Marks *et al.* 1968). All the excavated sediment was sieved through a 2 x 2 mm mesh and lithic material was collected for analytical study. The material was carefully packed to be kept at the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums in Khartoum and, afterwards, in the forthcoming museum of the Merowe Dam Project planned to be built in the village of Abu Dom.

Results

It should be noted that the Palaeolithic sites in the Multaga-Abu Dom area are not "sites" in the traditional sense, but rather artifact concentrations (cf., among others, Dunnell and Dancey 1983; Ebert 1992). They are remnants of Pleistocene formations and deposits containing artifacts that were partially preserved from fluvial and eolian erosion. The

majority of them was included within an area located on a pediment about 5 km south of the present course of the Nile. The area extended between Site 106 (see below, for the description of the test excavation) to the North (N 17°54.990'/E 31°12.978') and Site 93 (N 17°54.324'/E 31°12.299'). Most artifacts were well-protected in the deposits. They were in good conditions of preservation and did not undergo rolling or weathering.

Site 97 (N 17°54.720'/E 31°12.534'). This site was selected for a sounding because it was located in the centre of the main area with Pleistocene remnants. It proved to be the richest in artifacts. Its surface extended over a large area of 38 x 28 m. It exhibited Mousterian and Levallois cores and sidescrapers, also on a blade, scattered on the surface. It included large cobbles of Hudi and brown chert and outcrops of sandstone. The sondage at this location went down to a depth of 67 cm.

The upper layer (Layer 1) pertained to a Holocene paleosol and comprised Middle Palaeolithic and Neolithic artifacts. Layer 2 was a horizon of reddish medium-loose sands with gravel. A stone line at the bottom of this layer suggested that this deposit must have accumulated during the Final Pleistocene. It comprised Middle Palaeolithic artifacts eroded from the lower deposit and, possibly, Upper Palaeolithic lithics. It is particularly interesting to note that the tool-kit in this layer included a tanged simple convex sidescraper, a tanged denticulated endscraper and a Nubian sidescrapers. Layer 3 was separated from the upper horizon by a very thin layer of eolian sand. It included numerous Middle Palaeolithic artifacts. A few cores were reduced to obtain blades and another one was Levallois. Levallois flakes were also present. The tool-kit consisted of sidescrapers of different types, notched and denticulated flakes, a bifacial tool, an endscraper, a tanged Levallois flake, a backed knife, and a truncated flake. Calcareous concretions appeared on the top part of this layer. Layers 4 and 5 included gradually decreasing quantities of archaeological material.

Site 93 (N 17°54.324'/E 31°12.299'). This site was at the south-western end of the Pleistocene formations. For this reason it was chosen for a test excavation. Its stratigraphy was similar to that of Site 97. The Holocene paleosol (Layer 1) was thicker and better preserved than at Site 97. The uppermost deposit included very few Middle Palaeolithic artifacts

that eroded from the lower horizon and showed different conditions of preservation. Layer 2 confirmed the presence of a stone line and an erosional phase between the formation of Layer 2 and Layer 3, recognised in the previous site. The stone line was slightly more irregular and patchy than at Site 97. This is probably why the underlying silty deposit included more sandy sediments, which penetrated from the upper formation. Layer 2 included a Nubian core and few other artifacts. Layer 3 included a sidescraper and Layer 4 comprised extremely rare artifacts that probably penetrated from the upper layers.

Site 106 (N 17°54.990'/E 31°12.978'). This site represented the north-eastern boundary of the main area with Pleistocene remnants. It was tested to check the entity of the deposit in the sub-surface towards the northern end of the study area. The sondage went down to a depth of 53 cm. No Holocene paleosol was preserved at this site. Layer 1 was a dark red sandy deposit with a great quantity of coarse gravel and several artifacts. This horizon continued in Layer 2, but became slightly more yellowish. Layer 3 consisted of compact yellow sand with finer gravel and very few rolled artifacts.

Site 108 (N 17°55.063'/E 31°09.156'). Unlike previous sites, this was located 10 m north of the irrigation canal of the forthcoming agricultural fields of the resettlement, presently under construction. This site will be destroyed with the flooding of the fields, together with other sites. It extended over an elongated area of 23 x 3 m, which was partly preserved from erosion. It showed Levallois cores and flakes on the surface. The sondage at this location went down to a depth of 37 cm. The deposit was a hard and compacted reddish brown sandy silt with rare artifacts. The profile of the dug out canal showed that this deposit developed on an alluvial horizon of an ancient bed of the Nile.

Discussion

The lithic assemblages collected from the sondages in the Multaga-Abu Dom area provided some new information on the Middle Paleolithic (Middle Stone Age) in Nubia, which still is, apart from extremely rare exceptions (Geus 2002; Van Peer in press), scarcely known. The technological features of this material suggested several differences from the Middle Palaeolithic complexes previously

identified in upper Nubia. They could be only partly assimilated to the typical Nubian Middle Palaeolithic complex (Guichard and Guichard 1965, 1968; Van Peer and Vermeersch 1990; Van Peer 1998). The main difference was that they completely lacked the distinctive bifacial foliate tools. Retouched tools were common in the assemblages, together with a wide variety of débitage products. Therefore, although they lack some typical Nubian Middle Palaeolithic tools, the lithic industries from Multaga-Abu Dom could not be simply defined as Middle Palaeolithic I, that is, the so-called *industries de gaspillage* or workshops of stone knapping, which yielded all the preparation products of the chaîne opératoire apart from the final end products that were taken elsewhere for use (Guichard and Guichard 1965).

Side scrapers, including one Nubian specimen, were the most frequent tool type and a Nubian core was also present. The characteristic Nubian artifacts occurred in Layer 2, at both Site 97 and Site 93, that is, above the layers with the majority of Middle Palaeolithic artifacts. It should also be remarked that two out of three tanged tools appeared in Layer 2, at Site 97.

The presence of tanged tools provided some important indications on the relations between Aterian and Nubian traditions. Clearly, some Nubian components were present in the Multaga-Abu Dom area, confirming the specific identity of the Middle Palaeolithic complex in Nubia. On the other hand, the evidence for Aterian elements suggested influences from further western regions that, on my opinion, penetrated from the Sahara through Western Sudan. Several Aterian techno-complexes were collected in the Wadi Howar, Wadi Shaw and Laqiya valley (el Deen Idris 1994; Garcea personal observation). This was a major tributary of the Nile that joined the main river not far from our study area.

The large amount of artifacts in the silts of Layer 3, particularly at Site 97, suggested that strong erosion must have affected the original deposit. As a consequence, the archaeological material must have undergone a considerable vertical displacement, although it was not markedly disturbed horizontally.

To conclude, three different Middle Palaeolithic (Middle Stone Age) aspects could be detected in the Multaga-Abu Dom area. The earliest one, attested to Layers 3, at Sites 93 and 97 and at Sites 106 and 108, was a generalised Middle Palaeolithic; the other two

horizons were later and included Nubian features, on one hand, and Aterian characteristics, on the other. I suggest that these two techno-complexes represent two separate cultural contexts that came into contact in this part of Nubia.

Ultimately, the area with Palaeolithic sites is partially within the flooding zone presently under construction for the new settlement of the peoples evacuated from the 4th Cataract of the Nile, where the Merowe Dam is going to be built. The area is very close to the forthcoming agricultural fields and settlements at Multaga. As a matter of fact, at the time of the test excavations, bulldozers and trucks were constantly passing-by to dig water canals and one of the canals has already destroyed a site (Site 90). Therefore, it should be noted that all the sites in the Multaga-Abu Dom area remain exposed to severe damages and demand salvage actions.

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