

FROM THE FIELD TO THE WEB AND BACK RESUMING ARCHAEOLOGICAL ACTIVITIES IN SUDAN¹

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The paper presents the new archaeological project established by Sapienza University of Rome in Sudan at the site of Hujair Gubli, setting it against the recent research defined and carried out in the past years (2019-2021). The general idea and the historical background underpinning such a programme will be reviewed, together with some of the results (both tangible and intangible) that have been produced. Finally, the main tracks of future agenda will be prospectively outlined.

Keywords: archives; exhibition; Hugair Gubli; Sudan; temple

1. INTRODUCTION

A survey conducted in January 2020 in the area of the fourth cataract, under the auspices of the Sudanese National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM), was aimed at identifying a potential site for a new archaeological project.² The mission was set within the framework of a renewed research programme that found, in the recovery of field activities in Sudan, an extraordinary opportunity to resume and give continuity to the established presence of Sapienza University of Rome in this country as much as to develop a new fruitful agenda.

Sapienza has indeed a long history of commitment to the safeguarding of Sudanese archaeological heritage, reaching back to the epochal rescue campaign of Nubian monuments promoted by UNESCO on the occasion of the construction of the «High Dam» of Aswan. To recapture and refresh this tradition a programme was thus designed and articulated around three integrated key aspects (fig. 1): (1) a scrutiny of the archival material concerning the historical excavations of Sapienza in Sudan and mainly stored at the Museum of the Near East, Egypt and the Mediterranean (MVOEM) of Sapienza University;³ (2) the arrangement of a small exhibition on these early activities; (3) the proposal of a fieldwork project to the Sudanese authorities to develop in collaboration with them.

2. FROM THE ARCHIVES TO THE EXHIBITION

In 2019 a collaboration with the Museum of the Near East, Egypt and the Mediterranean (MVOEM) of Sapienza University was aimed at assessing the archival material deposited there after the transfer and renovation of the collection that was inaugurated in March

¹ Paola Buzi wrote §§ 1, 2, Angelo Colonna §§ 3, 4. A brief communication on this subject was delivered by the authors together with Murtada Bushara Mohamed (Jebel Barkal Museum) at the 15th International Congress for Nubian Studies held in Warsaw (29th August - 4th September).

² The survey group included Paola Buzi, Julian Bogdani, Angelo Colonna and the NCAM inspector Mohammed El Toum.

³ The inspection was made possible by the kind permission of the Museum Director, Lorenzo Nigro, and thanks to the help of its curator, Daria Montanari.

2015.⁴ Founded in the Sixties of the 20th century by Sabatino Moscati and Sergio Donadoni, the museum has a long history of scholarship rooted in the archaeological activities carried out by the university in several countries of the Mediterranean, including, of course, Egypt and Sudan. Probably as the result of the relocation, before entering the new museum set-up, the material appeared to have been randomly placed in a number of boxes, with no general inventory of the assembled files. Accordingly, the main course of action consisted of reviewing the individual documents, looking into them, and then recording and scanning the relevant ones so as to produce a preliminary draft record of the existing documents and a digital archive of data, while also assessing their informative and scientific value.⁵ As a matter of fact, while all the historical sites where Sapienza operated, both in Egypt and Sudan, were represented, the material was fragmented and not homogeneous, including for the most part graphic and photographic sources (pictures, drawings, maps), often with their associated register, together with drafts of reports, samples of published articles, pieces of newspapers, sketches, personal notes and correspondence of Donadoni.

Despite gaps in the preserved record, both chronological (only certain years were haphazardly documented) and typological (with few exceptions, almost no fieldwork diaries could be identified), the documentation concerning the activities in Sudan was rather consistent, allowing to map and appreciate the various intellectual and practical steps that led to the establishment and growth of the first Italian archaeological programme in that country.

Therefore, while the spread of Covid pandemic was slowing down the course of the archaeological project, the parallel idea to transfer the gathered information into a virtual exhibition was developed, with the aim of reconstructing, presenting, and disseminating the most salient aspects of such history, from the early days to the latest achievements. Built upon a large array of documents produced and collected by the very protagonists of this story, the virtual exhibition «Along the Nile, through the Archives, and into the Web» is primarily intended as a tool for illustrating the results of Sapienza's activities at sites like Tamit (1964),⁶ Sonqi Tino (1967-1970),⁷ and Jebel Barkal (1973-2004),⁸ in addition to other places between the second and fourth cataracts visited or surveyed in those same years (fig. 2).⁹ Since some of the sites described (like Tamit) are no longer accessible, the value of the information recorded and displayed is all the more important. At the same

⁴ Montanari 2020, 202. On the early and recent history of the museum, see Ciasca - Matthiae - Sist 1993; Nigro 2015.

⁵ The work was carried out with the collaboration of the following PhD and Master students: Marta Addressi, Domizia D'Erasmus, Elisabetta Falduto, Valeria Tappeti.

⁶ Donadoni 1967.

⁷ Most recently Sist 2012, with earlier bibliography.

⁸ The results of Sapienza excavations at both the temple sector and the so-called «Palace of Natakamani», were only partially published through years, but a final publication was never produced. See Barocas 1982; Donadoni 1992; 1993; Donadoni - Bosticco 1982; Mitchell 1996; Roccati 1997; Sist 2000; 2006; 2011. Since 2011, Ca' Foscari University of Venice has taken up the fieldwork and engaged in the effort to pull together earlier information and fresh data in a comprehensive interpretation of the site. See Ciampini - Iannarilli 2022, with earlier bibliography.

⁹ <http://mostrasapienzainsudan.saras.uniroma1.it/it/>.

time, it aims to provide a historical background to the new archaeological mission that operates at the temple site of Hugair Gubli and in the area of Magal (§ 3).

The online exhibition is conceived as a website with a simple hierarchical structure that provides intuitive content access and navigation. The website architecture consists of a homepage and five thematic sections corresponding to (and named after) the main archaeological areas presented.

The Homepage offers a general introduction, explaining the concept and history of the exhibition in Italian, Arabic and English, while the individual pages dedicated to the archaeological sites are available both in Italian and English. In the latter, for each site the geographical position and the timeline of its exploration are indicated, while the description cover the key aspects and features of the archaeological context as well as salient episodes in the history of research (like the risky but successful incident of the recovery and restoration of the paintings from Sonqi Tino), and is visually supported by a rich photogallery that highlights major monuments, materials (sometimes lost), but also moments, peoples, and achievements of those enterprises.

The exhibition was promoted and supported by the Italian Embassy in Khartoum as part of the «Integrated Promotion Project» and was officially inaugurated on 20 May 2021 at the (virtual) presence of both Sapienza and Sudanese authorities. In virtue of its online permanent character, the exhibition benefits of increased exposure, global reach and accessibility, also offering the opportunity to edit and enrich features of the work.¹⁰ In addition, given its conceptual and graphical design, it was also possible to turn it into a physical showcase that was first displayed at the Museo dell'Arte Classica of Sapienza¹¹ and then transferred to Khartoum on occasion of the event «Italia and Sudan between Archaeology and Conservation», on 20 October 2021, where it was opened in the Comboni Institute and left as a token to the Sudanese colleagues.

3. BACK TO THE FIELD: A NEW RESEARCH PROJECT AT HUGAIR GUBLI

Following the 2020 survey, the site for a new archaeological project was identified in what remains of a monumental temple located in the modern hamlet of Hugair Gubli, some 40 km south of the archaeological complex of Jebel Barkal, on the right bank of the Nile (fig. 3).¹²

The site was only mentioned en-passant by the French explorer Frederic Cailliaud as a brief stop along the way to near village of Magal, which on the other hand was recorded since then as the location of some remains of a large church building, including columns and capitals.¹³

Thus, the earlier archaeological history of Hugair has passed unnoticed for a long time and the temple has remained concealed within a private house¹⁴ until it was first

¹⁰ A possibility would be, in this regard, the updating of information in keeping with the progress of fieldwork at Hugair Gubli.

¹¹ Thanks to the helpfulness of the director, the late Marcello Barbanera. On the museum, see Barbanera 1995.

¹² 18°14'39.2''(N); 31°38'33.3''(E). The site name is also spelled Hugeir or Hujair in literature.

¹³ Cailliaud 1826, 36-37; the two sites are spelled, respectively, Hagueyr and el-Magât.

¹⁴ In view of the archaeological interest and of the fieldwork to be carried out *in loco*, NCAM authorities arranged the expropriation and the corresponding compensation for the private owner.

rediscovered by *The Polish Joint Archaeological Expedition to Middle Nile* in 2000, during the fieldwork activities conducted within the framework of the *Southern Dongola Reach Survey* (SDRS),¹⁵ and then partially excavated by the Sudanese *Jebel Barkal Museum Archaeological Mission*,¹⁶ though never fully investigated on a larger scale (fig. 4).

The temple stands on a rocky ground facing the river and consists of a large building of which the massive foundations were cut into the local bedrock of sandstone. Its exact dimensions and layout, however, are largely unknown as only few elements on the surface have been recorded. Among these, some huge blocks belonging to the naos and columns bases (one having the diameter of 180 cm), still *in situ*, give us a partial though impressive idea of the original monumentality of this structure (fig. 5).

The identity of the cult and the chronology of the temple also need to be clarified with precision.¹⁷ Some decorated blocks inscribed in hieroglyphs with the name of Gatisen (*g3ti[sn]*), found by the Sudanese colleagues and preserved in the Gebel Barkal Museum (fig. 6), attest to a late Napatan or early Meroitic phase (end of the 4th-beginning of the 3rd century BCE) of the sanctuary, though a possible earlier core cannot be excluded.¹⁸

The discovery is significant since it adds a new piece of evidence on the royal figure of Menmaatse-Setepenamun Gatisen - possibly the Aktisanes mentioned by the Classical writer Hecataeus of Abdera¹⁹ -, who is likely to belong in one of the least documented periods of Kushite history, i.e., the time of the so-called «Neo-Ramesside kings» between Nastasen and Arkamaniqo.²⁰

The Nubian sources on our king consist of scattered inscriptions from Nuri and Jebel Barkal which give the names and titles of the king. They include: (1) a sandstone slab from the Amun temple at Gebel Barkal (B 500) with Throne and Birth names (Ex Khartoum 5227); (2) a sandstone door jamb (?) of unknown context from Gebel Barkal with Throne and Birth names (Ex Khartoum 5225); (3) a lost temple building inscription from Nuri with his full royal titulary.²¹

As for the Greek sources, the name Gatisen has been equated with that of Aktisanes, who is presented by Hecataeus as the Ethiopian rival of the penultimate violent and arrogant king of the 26th dynasty in Egypt, Amasis.²² The attestation exhibits an immediate fictional character, and although both the literary identification and the chronological

¹⁵ Żurawski 2001, 283-289; 2003, 358-359.

¹⁶ Bushara Mohamed *et al.* 2014.

¹⁷ Żurawski 2001, 286 offers some speculations on such issues.

¹⁸ Bushara Mohamed *et al.* 2014, 27, fig. 5. Dr Murtada Bushara Mohamed kindly allowed us to see the relief fragments stored in the museum during our visit at Jebel Barkal.

¹⁹ In Diodorus 1.60-61.1; see Eide *et al.* 1996, 511-515, 520 (88).

²⁰ This sequence of kings is so named after the Ramesside-style *prenomina* they adopted. The chronological position of these kings, however, is not fully agreed upon. See Pope 2020, for general discussion; Török 1997, 203, 394; Zibelius-Chen 2006, 295, Table IV.3; 2011, 263-264.

²¹ Eide *et al.* 1996, 511-515 (86-87). On the two elements from Jebel Barkal, cf. also Porter - Moss 1975, 216 (18), 222; the door jamb is now displayed at the «Jebel Barkal Museum».

²² For comments on the passage and its chronological interpretation as referring to an early Meroitic king, see Eide *et al.* 1996, 520; Priese 1977, 355; Török 2007, 379-380; 2011, 19-20.

position of Gatisen have been questioned,²³ it is generally acknowledged that his reign should be placed in the late Napatan or early Meroitic period (i.e., around the 4th-3rd centuries BC) and that Hecataeus used the name of a famous contemporary Kushite king “in order to underline for his readers the (fictional) historicity of a story in which he blames Amasis as unlawful king”, as Lazlo Török has remarked.²⁴

It is again Török who has noted that the titulary of Gatisen/Aktisanes displays a Ramesside-style in a form which reveals the actual influence of models from the Late and early Ptolemaic periods. Both his Horus and Throne names («Strong bull beloved of Maat»; «Established is the Maat of Ra, Whom Amun has chosen») replicate Ramesside prototypes through the mediation, respectively, of the Horus name of Philip III Arrhidaeus (323-316 BC) and the Throne name of Ptolemy I Soter (304-283/282 BC). These elements, according to the scholar, add weight to the late Napatan/early Meroitic hypothesis, placing the reign of this king around the end of the 4th century or, at the latest, to the period of Ptolemy I.²⁵

Especially interesting, in this regard, is the *nebty* name of Gatisen - «Whose monuments are great in the house of his father Amun in Napata» - as it contains a strong propagandistic statement which, despite the ideological overtone, might reflect an actual building/restoration programme so far only indirectly (i.e. epigraphically) attested, but which would have included Hugair beside Nuri and Jebel Barkal.

Returning to the dating and character of the temple, the most conspicuous and intriguing aspect is represented by the fact that the area where it stands appears to have been used as a quarry (still visible behind the temple itself) and then rearranged to accommodate the religious building (fig. 7). Both the quarrying techniques and the tool-marks suggest a rough dating to the Kushite period, but an earlier New Kingdom exploitation of the area is also likely.²⁶ On the other hand, only Christian pottery was identified on the spot and no diagnostic evidence was collected dating to earlier periods.²⁷

The particular location of the edifice and its possible association with a quarry raise some relevant questions about its architecture, religious character, and chronological development, which future excavation will thoroughly address.

Finally, the local geographical environment and landscape should be considered as relevant for the contextualisation of this hitherto unknown temple. The site lies within a region that is known for having been of strategic economic importance in Late Antiquity, as the nearby fortress of Bakhit indicates.²⁸ The whole area shows clear evidence of Christian and pre- and proto-Islamic occupation, including the remains (columns shafts and capitals) of a stone church situated among the fields in the neighbouring district of Magal (the site was also visited during the Sapienza survey, fig. 8).

²³ A dating of the «Neo-Ramesside king» to the early 1st millennium BCE has been proposed in particular by Morkot 2000, 147-150, 157. Yet this hypothesis has not gained general support; for the traditional interpretation, see the previous notes.

²⁴ Török 2007, 380; 2011, 20.

²⁵ Eide *et al.* 1996, 512-513; Török 2007, 293, 379; 2011, 20.

²⁶ According to Bushara Mohamed *et al.* 2014, 27.

²⁷ Żurawski 2001, 285.

²⁸ Żurawski 2001, 285.

A regional, local-scale approach to the temple site of Hujair Gubli, one that combines a focused excavation of the sanctuary with a detailed topographic survey of its surrounding and a keen investigation of later transformations and reuse of the space, is thus expected to impact positively on a more comprehensive understanding and diachronic reconstruction of the temple with(in) its changing cultural landscape.

4. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude with some final remarks that design a perspective of research for the next future, the beginning of a qualified archaeological exploration of the temple area at Hujair Gubli should (and will) include:

1. the implementation of a more accurate digital topographic survey (photogrammetric survey through drone footage with ground level check with total station) of the temple site in order to produce a general plan of the building and its surroundings as complete and detailed as possible;
2. the arrangement of a focused stratigraphic excavation of the temple and documentation of the related material culture in order to establish the architectural history of the building and address relevant issues for the chronological and religious interpretation of the site. Particular attention, in this regard, should be paid to the cave-like setting of the structure in order to better understand the exploitation of the quarry itself as well as its relationship (physical, chronological, ideological) with the (later?) religious building;
3. the arrangement of a broader topographical survey of the micro-region wherein the temple of Hujair Gubli lies, in order to understand its position, vocation, and relationships with other features within the local landscape;
4. the evaluation and assessment of possible conservation and musealisation options, also taking advantage of the structures of the house surrounding the temple, so as to improve the accessibility and visibility of the site on one side and build up a productive engagement with the local population on the other.

All these points, of course, need to be tested and adjusted on the field and this is the ultimate purpose of the new joint mission of the NCAM and Sapienza that will resume its works in November 2022.

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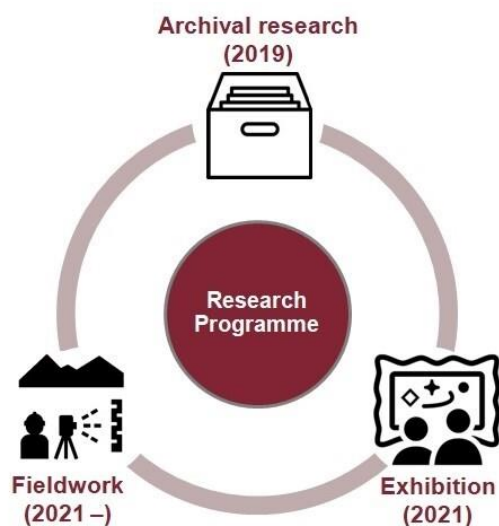


Fig. 1 - Diagram showing the activities included in the new research programme of Sapienza in Sudan.

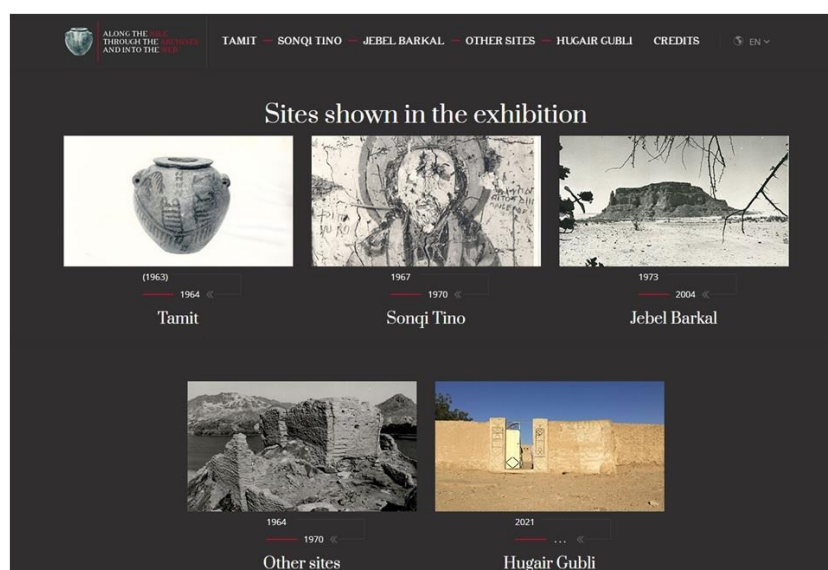


Fig. 2 - Detail of the Homepage of the online exhibition «Along the Nile, through the Archives, and into the Web» showing the main sites described. ([http://mostrasapienzainsudan.saras.uniroma1.it/it/.](http://mostrasapienzainsudan.saras.uniroma1.it/it/))

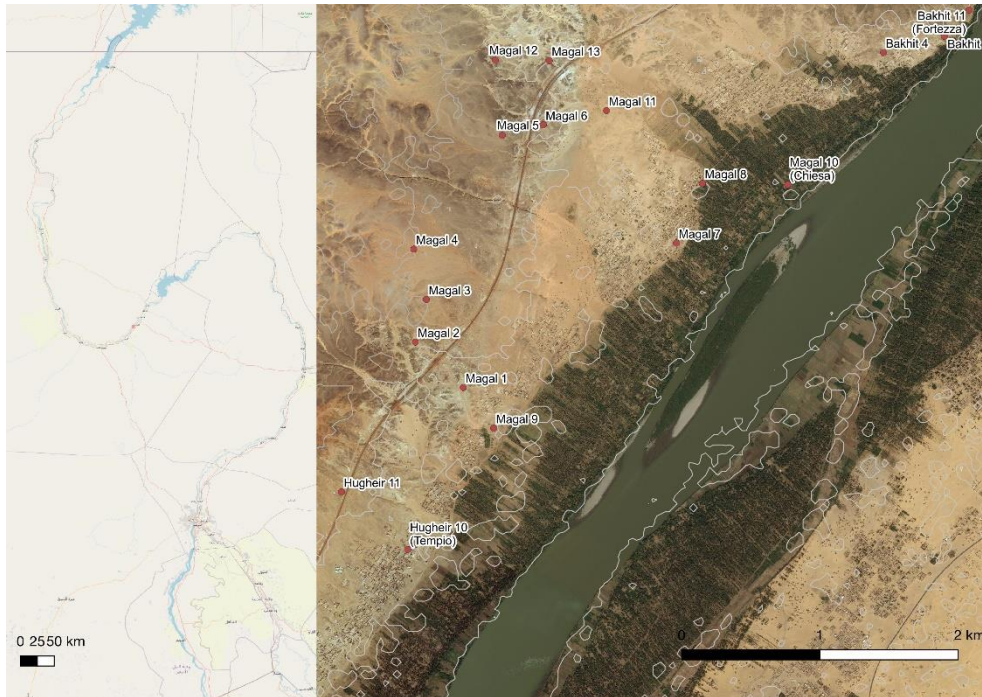


Fig. 3 - Map and overview of the modern village of Hugair Gubli (highlighted) and the neighbouring area of Magal, with temple site and main surveyed features highlighted (GIS elaboration by J. Bogdani after Żurawski 2003).



Fig. 4 - Panoramic view of the temple area inside the modern house (photo: A. Colonna, 2020).



Fig. 5a-c - Some of the monumental features (sandstone blocks, columns) of the temple (photo: A. Colonna, 2020).



Fig. 6 - Sandstone relief fragment inscribed with the name of king Gatisen (photo: A. Colonna, 2020).



Fig. 7 - View of the quarry area behind the temple site (photo: A. Colonna, 2020).



Fig. 8 - Granite capital decorated with cross in relief from the site of Magal (photo: A. Colonna, 2020).