

Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw  
Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences

**Soba Expedition**  
Preliminary report  
on the archaeological excavation before the construction of the storage house



by

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## Introduction

Since November 2019 a research project entitled “Soba – the heart of Alwa. Spatial organization of the capital city on the Blue Nile” is being conducted at Soba East (Khartoum Province). The project is hosted by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw and the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences. The project is funded by the National Science Centre, Poland based on agreement no.UMO-2018/29/B/HS3/02533. Institutions supporting the project are: National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums of Sudan (NCAM), Al-Neelain University, Historic Environment Scotland and University of Silesia.

During fieldwork, a large amount of small finds has been acquired, resulting in a need for storage space. With no storage house available in Soba and with the approval from the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums of Sudan action has been taken to create such a secure space. A plot was selected next to the Police Station, which is located on the archaeological site. It is on a small elevation. In 1980s surface cleaning was conducted in the area (AE6) revealing pottery fragments and remains of a collapsed mud brick wall (Welsby and Daniels 1991, 13).

Before the construction of the depot could be initiated, archaeological excavations were undertaken to collect and document all archaeological remains.

The project is directed by Dr Mariusz Drzewiecki, excavations were headed by Dr Tomasz Michalik and Joanna Ciesielska. NCAM was represented by senior inspector Elmontaser Dafaalla Mohamed Elamin Elmoubarak. The trench was labeled 1/SH which stands for Storage House no 1.

## Trench 1/SH

Trench 1/SH was excavated in the first half of January 2020, at the beginning of the second part of 2019/2020 excavation season, the first campaign of the expedition to Soba. The full investigation of the trench took 6 days, between Jan 12 and Jan 16, 2020.

With the prospect of the storage measuring roughly 4 by 9 m, the trench was set out to measure 10 x 5 m, oriented roughly NW-SE (**photo 1**). The location of the trench is indicated by the arrow on the front-page of this report.

Before excavation, pottery was collected from the surface. One fragment was inscribed (**photo 2**). First subsurface level (Deposit 1), composed of gravel and greyish silt, contained pottery, as well as small amounts of faunal remains, three fragments of glass and two beads (one spherical bead made of clay and one made of ostrich eggshell). Underneath, the first walking level composed of trampled mud with an admixture of lime was identified. Labelled Deposit 2, it was only preserved in the northern corner of the trench. Cleaning of the surface of Deposit 2 revealed the existence of three post-holes (all approx. 8 cm in diameter).





Photo 1. Trench 1/SH before excavation (photo Tomasz Michalik)



Photo 2. Inscribed fragment of pottery (inv no SOBA\_2020/SH1/sf075) found on the surface (photo Joanna Ciesielska)

Slightly below the walking level (Deposit 2) and towards the south-east, the corner of a mud-brick structure was uncovered, protruding from the north-eastern section of the trench. Labeled object 26, it was composed of two walls. The southern wall, running NW-SE, was formed of two courses of mud-bricks – the outer course of greyish brown mud and the inner one of red-colored mud bricks. Meanwhile, the northern wall was constructed of grey mud bricks only, severely destroyed by a later cut.

Three separate units were distinguished within the second layer (Layer 2): loose, brownish grey silt with some gravel in the north-western and central part of the trench (Deposit 3); grey silt with admixture of ash along the central portion of the north-western wall of the trench, extending towards south-east (Deposit 4); and loose brownish silt in the southern half of the trench (Deposit 5). Deposit 3 contained moderate amounts of pottery, one circular token (**photo 3**), along with some animal bones, two stone tools and a small fragment of glass. Five wooden posts were uncovered in the central part of the trench, directly south-west of the corner of the Feature 26, forming a corner of a structure oriented N-S and possibly attached to the mud-brick walls (**photos 4 and 5**). Deposit 4 contained large amounts of light grey ash, along with smears of burnt matter and charcoal, pieces of which were collected for radiocarbon dating. Also, a sample of approx. 0.5 kg of soil with burnt seeds was collected for archaeobotanical analysis. Deposit 2 was located on top of Deposit 4.



Photo 3. Circular token found in layer 2, Deposit 3 (photo Joanna Ciesielska)



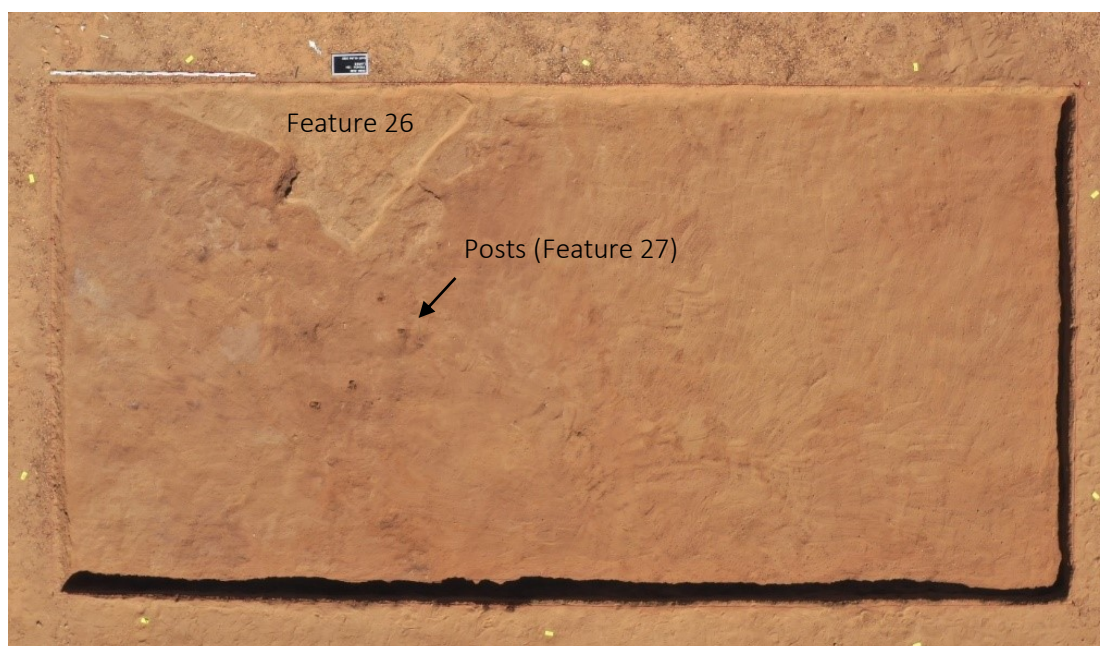


Photo 4. Trench 1/SH after exploration of layer 2 (photo Mariusz Drzewiecki)



Photo 5. Remains of posts discovered in Trench 1/SH – Feature 27 (photo Tomasz Michalik)

Subsequently Layer 3 was explored. Upon the removal of Deposit 4 in the northern corner of the trench, another walking level (Deposit 6) was uncovered. A thin layer of mud with addition of lime extended from the northern corner of the trench towards the south-west to the middle of the excavation area and the posts (which for the time being were left in place) and towards the south-east around Structure 26. Underneath Deposit 6 in the northern corner of the trench, a context of compact gravel with admixture of silt as a binding agent (Deposit 7) was uncovered. Badly worn and weathered, it contained three separate layers: two layers of underfloor priming and another walking level in between. The upper priming level was directly beneath Deposit 6, constituting a levelling layer, while the lower one was connected to the middle floor, which was only recorded in section along Structure 26. Below, another

walking level, Deposit 8, was unearthed. It was composed of very compact, finely grained silt with lime and extended well into the middle of the trench and around Structure 26. A large number of postholes of different shapes and sizes were identified within Deposit 8. Some of them seem to form circular patterns (**photo 6**), while other appear to be distributed randomly. The southern part of the trench showed no trace of walking levels.

Underneath Deposit 5 another layer (Deposit 9), of reddish brown silt with some gravel has been uncovered, yielding moderate amounts of pottery sherds, animal bones and a few stone tools. Along the north-eastern wall of the trench, roughly in the middle of its extent, poor remnants (almost a negative) of a wooden beam (approx. 12 cm in width) was identified (**photo 7**).



Photo 6. Remains of circular timber construction (photo Tomasz Michalik)

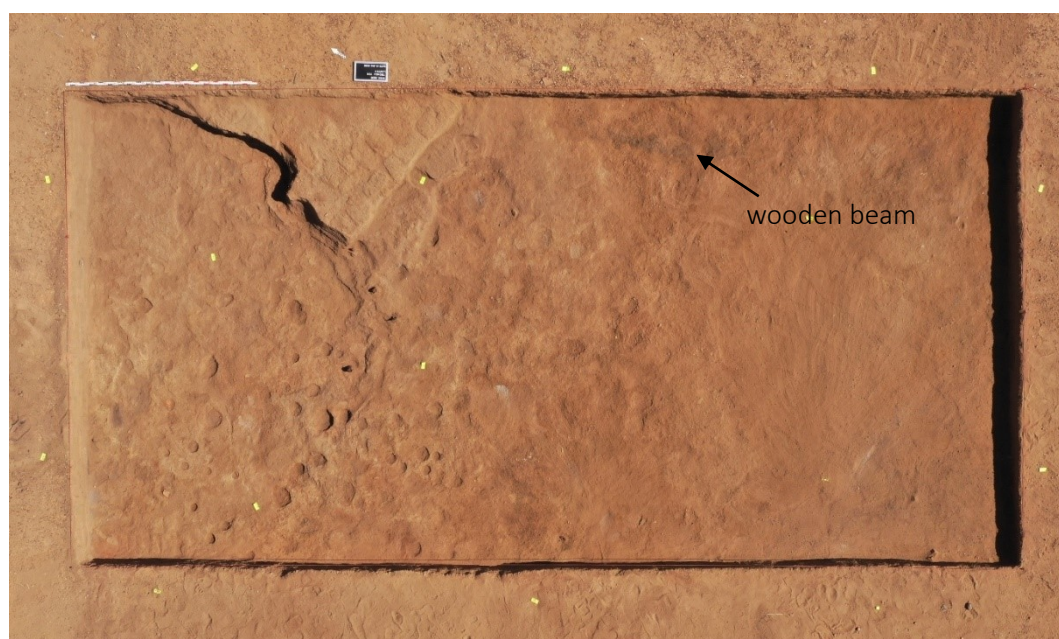


Photo 7. Trench 1/SH after exploration of the layer 3. In the north-western part the remains of timber constructions were recorded and postholes were identified (photo Mariusz Drzewiecki)

Excavation of Layer 4 (Deposit 8) revealed that wooden posts in the middle of the trench (labelled Feature 27) were originally set on this level. Underneath the adjacent Deposit 9 in the southern part of



the trench, a layer of brownish red soil with gravel was uncovered. At this stage exploration of layer 4 has been completed.

Similar composition characterized the context underlying Deposit 8 in the northern part of the trench, however, while the northern Deposit 10 contained large amounts of pottery, with four stone tools and animal bones, the southern one (Deposit 11) contained no cultural material. Only the northern half of the trench was thus excavated with bedrock being hit 10 cm below. After exploration of all cultural layers, Feature 26 was removed and final documentation was made (**photo 8 and 9**).



Photo 8. Fragment of glass found in the Feature 26 (photo Joanna Ciesielska)



Photo 9. Trench 1/SH after finishing of excavation. On the whole area the top of a natural layer was registered (photo Mariusz Drzewiecki)



During excavation of the foundation trenches for the storage house, small pieces of bone were recovered from the SE corner. Initial examination confirmed that the remains were human. A small rectangular trench was established and excavated to the level of the burial. The level which we considered natural layer, Deposit 11 (red gravel), is definitely geological in nature, yielding no archaeological material. It seems however that the burial was dug into the underlying rock without cutting Deposit 11. Skeletal remains were interred in an oval pit along the E-W axis with head pointing east (photo 10). The body has been placed in a contracted position on the right side with legs completely bent, right at an angle of ca. 80 degrees in relation to the spine and the left at ca. 65 degrees, right knee over left. Both arms were slightly bent with elbows pointing outwards and hands folded together next to the pelvis. The head of the adult individual was turned to the right, facing north. The morphology of human remains indicates that the deceased individual was a male, ca. 35-50 years at death. In order to confirm or deny the presence of any other burials within the premises of the future storage house, three test trenches were established: one, measuring 1 by 7 m, along the N-S midline of the trench, and two across, measuring 1 by 5 m. No other burials were found.

Photo 10. Burial of an adult male in an oval pit under the SE corner of Trench 1/SH (photo Joanna Ciesielska).



In the researched area two main occupational phases can be distinguished. The first is related to wooden buildings represented by post holes. The second (later) is associated with Feature 26 - mud brick construction phase. At least 4 occupational levels can be distinguished within the first phase of activity at the site. In the case of the mud-brick construction only one phase can be identified (foundation phase). On the basis of pottery, the investigated area can be dated to the Christian period. Further investigation of charcoal samples as well as detailed analysis of pottery will narrow down the dating and provide insight into the function of the discovered structures.



## References

Welsby, D.A., Daniels, C.M. (1991). *Soba. Archaeological research at a medieval capital on the Blue Nile* (Memoirs of the British Institute in Eastern Africa number 12). London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.

### List of small finds from trench 1/SH:

INV. NO	SEASON	DATE	AREA	FEATURE	LAYER	TYPE OF MATERIAL	NAME
SOBA_2020/SH1/sf066	2020-II	2020-01-12	1/SH		1	glass	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/sf067	2020-II	2020-01-13	1/SH		3	glass	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/sf068	2020-II	2020-01-13	1/SH		4	glass	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/sf069	2020-II	2020-01-13	1/SH		3	clay	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/sf070	2020-II	2020-01-14	1/SH		9	glass	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/sf071	2020-II	2020-01-14	1/SH		5	glass	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/sf072	2020-II	2020-01-15	1/SH		8	wood	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/sf073	2020-II	2020-01-16	1/SH	26		glass	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/sf074	2020-II	2020-01-16	1/SH		10	glass	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/sf075	2020-II	2020-01-16	1/SH	surface		clay	JC

### List of mass finds from trench 1/SH:

INV. NO	SEASON	DATE	AREA	FEATURE	DEPOSIT	POTTERY	BEADS	HUMAN BONES	ANIMAL BONES	SHELL	STONE TOOLS	CBM	PHOTOS NOS.	NAME
SOBA_2020/S H1/151	2020-II	2020-01-12	1/SH		1		2						SOBA_2020_F 0750-0754	JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/152	2020-II	2020-01-12	1/SH	surface		x								JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/153	2020-II	2020-01-12	1/SH		1	x								JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/154	2020-II	2020-01-12	1/SH		1				x					JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/155	2020-II	2020-01-12	1/SH		1					x				JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/156	2020-II	2020-01-13	1/SH		3	x								JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/157	2020-II	2020-01-13	1/SH		4	x								JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/158	2020-II	2020-01-13	1/SH		5	x								JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/159	2020-II	2020-01-13	1/SH		3				x					JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/160	2020-II	2020-01-13	1/SH		4				x					JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/161	2020-II	2020-01-13	1/SH		3						3		SOBA_2020_F 0769-0773	JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/162	2020-II	2020-01-13	1/SH		5						1		SOBA_2020_F 0759-0760	JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/163	2020-II	2020-01-14	1/SH		9						4		SOBA_2020_F 0761-0768	JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/164	2020-II	2020-01-14	1/SH		9	x								JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/165	2020-II	2020-01-14	1/SH		7	x								JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/166	2020-II	2020-01-14	1/SH		9				x					JC

SOBA_2020/S H1/167	2020-II	2020- 01-14	1/SH		5							1		JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/168	2020-II	2020- 01-14	1/SH		3		1						SOBA_2020_F 0755-0758	JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/169	2020-II	2020- 01-14	1/SH		5			x						JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/170	2020-II	2020- 01-15	1/SH		10						4		SOBA_2020_F 0778-0781	JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/171	2020-II	2020- 01-15	1/SH		10	x								JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/172	2020-II	2020- 01-15	1/SH		10			x						JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/175	2020-II	2020- 01-16	1/SH	26							1		SOBA_2020_F 0774-0777	JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/176	2020-II	2020- 01-16	1/SH	26			1						SOBA_2020_F 0749	JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/178	2020-II	2020- 01-16	1/SH	26				x						JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/179	2020-II	2020- 01-16	1/SH	26		x								JC
SOBA_2020/S H1/206	2020-II	2020- 01-22	1/SH		6	x								

List of samples from the trench 1/SH:

INV. NO	SEASON	DATE	AREA	FEATURE	LAYER	TYPE OF MATERIAL	PURPOSE	NAME
SOBA_2020/SH1/s082	2020-II	2020- 01-13	1/SH		4	animal teeth	Sr/C+O	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/s083	2020-II	2020- 01-13	1/SH		3	soil	archaeobotanical analysis	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/s084	2020-II	2020- 01-13	1/SH		3	wood	dating	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/s085	2020-II	2020- 01-13	1/SH		4	wood	dating	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/s086	2020-II	2020- 01-13	1/SH		4	charcoal	dating	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/s087	2020-II	2020- 01-13	1/SH		3	charcoal	dating	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/s088	2020-II	2020- 01-13	1/SH		4	soil	archaeobotanical analysis	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/s089	2020-II	2020- 01-13	1/SH		1	plaster fr.	composition	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/s090	2020-II	2020- 01-14	1/SH		7	plaster fr.	composition	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/s091	2020-II	2020- 01-15	1/SH		10	charcoal	dating	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/s092	2020-II	2020- 01-15	1/SH		9	charcoal	dating	JC
SOBA_2020/SH1/s093	2020-II	2020- 01-16	1/SH		6	wood	dating	JC
2020/SH1/s094	2020-II	2020- 01-16	1/SH	26, below bricks		ash	dating	JC