



Elsa Yvanez

Fashioning Sudan.

Archaeology of Dress along the Middle Nile

September 2022 marked the beginning of a new 5-year project on the archaeology of clothing practices in ancient Sudan and Nubia – *Fashioning Sudan*. Financed by the European Research Council (Starting Grant), *Fashioning Sudan* is housed at the Centre for Textile Research, Saxo Institute, at the University of Copenhagen. The team is composed of archaeologists specialised in archaeological textiles, animal skin/leather, and biochemical methods, together with experts in ancient weaving techniques, illustrations, and digital humanities.

The project uses garments as a privileged medium to reveal past identities, with the aim of bringing new and more representative knowledge about the populations of ancient Sudan and highlighting the entanglement of dress practices in the fabric of society. Our starting point is the acknowledgement that dress practices form a tangible and intimate gateway to past populations and their identities, following an individual from birth to death as a second skin. In ancient Sudan, “dress” includes all manner of body protection and ornamentation, such as clothing made of woven fabric and animal skin, hairstyles, jewellery, tattoos, and scarification (fig. 1). When combined according to specific cultural codes, these elements form “dress practices” functioning as powerful means of non-verbal communication and “dressing” the body into an individual and social persona. These fragile organic materials are exceptionally

well preserved in the dry sands of Sudan and Nubia, especially in funerary contexts where garments were reused to wrap the deceased. Uniting archaeology and the study of cloth cultures, *Fashioning Sudan* will explore how the diverse populations of ancient Sudan purposely selected resources, techniques, forms, and ornaments, weaving their own identities and embedding in their garments their relations to nature and the society.

The project’s settings and material sources

The project is ambitious in scope, covering c. 4,000 years of Sudanese history, from the Bronze Age to the Late Medieval period (c. 2500 BCE to 1500 CE). This long period is marked by the development of the Kushite culture, which emerged from different basins along the Nile and reached, at its peak, from the southern plains of the Gezira (south of modern Khartoum along the Blue and White Nile) all the way north to Lower Nubia. Over these 4,000 years, the Kushite realm integrated new populations (such as Egyptian settlers, Noba and Blemmyes tribes), changed its centre of power (such as Kerma, Meroe, Dongola) and adopted new religions (such as Pharaonic polytheism, Christianity). Despite these major changes, the Kushite culture seems to have retained its own identity, deeply ingrained in its particular environment and location as the “corridor to Africa”. However, since the beginnings of its archaeological exploration, our understanding of the



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Sudanese past has remained limited to an inadequately rigid and linear historical framework revolving around the homogenous culture of sedentary elites and often limited to binary oppositions (sedentary/farming vs. nomad/pastoral, Pharaonic vs. “African” influences, external imperialism vs. local tribal societies). Stepping aside the monumental remains favoured in traditional archaeology, *Fashioning Sudan* will propose a new paradigm focussing directly on the people and the way they chose to portray themselves to the world.

To sustain the project’s all-encompassing approach, it is essential to base our work on a very high number of objects, covering an extensive time and geographical scale. Previous research and a preliminary survey have revealed material from more than 70 sites, representing 2000+ artefacts. Ongoing discussions with colleagues continue to bring more specimens to light, left unattended and unpublished in excavation storage magazines. So far, material corpora from 15 key sites have been chosen, and agreements have been obtained to study archaeological textile and skin garments in nine international museums and excavation teams, in Sudan, Egypt, Europe, and North America. Particular attention has been paid to ensuring a chronological and geographical coverage as exhaustive as conservation permits. We have endeavoured to select sites (fig. 2) and material according to the following criteria: (i) sites located in both Central Sudan, the fourth cataract region, and Nubia; (ii) sites dated to understudied periods which represents an unfortunate “gap” in the material chronology; (iii) long-lasting sites bridging many centuries; (iv) assemblages suggesting interesting cultural dynamics, such as those occurring during transitional periods or in border regions.

Objectives and Work Packages

The objectives of the project are 1) to build the archaeology of dress practices in Sudan as a valuable method to study the human past, 2) to provide new and original knowledge about the natural resources and socio-economic dynamics of Sudan, and 3) to create a dynamic model articulating diverse narratives of identity in ancient Sudan.

The project embraces three different ways in which humans experience identity: we *craft* and *perform* our own identities, while *recognising* the identities of others. These three dimensions led to the creation of three Work Packages centred around these concepts:

WP1. Recognising Identities, in which the team will work on the elaboration of a new paradigm to study garments as identity markers in Sudan,

WP2. Crafting Identities, in which we will reveal the animal and plant species as well as the skills and craft dynamics necessary to produce garments, and

WP3. Performing Identities, in which we will strive to understand the phenomenon of dress practices as a whole: how it developed, and how it structured the construction of self and group identities.

Approach and methodology

Throughout the manufacture and selection of garments, each individual expresses key aspects of his or her identity and capacity: access to raw material, level of skills, personal aesthetics, cultural background, place in society, and conformism or opposition to the generally accepted practice. Operated by larger groups of people, the deliberate choice of garments in daily life, in special events such as funerals, and in iconography, is highly significant. Following the pioneering work of Marie Louise Stig Sørensen in her

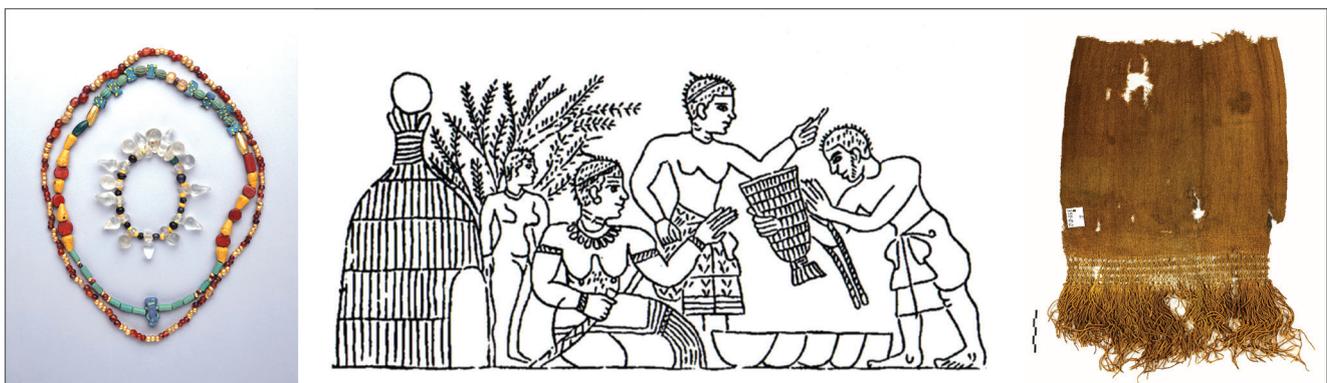


Fig. 1: Examples of dress practices as represented on a copper alloy bowl from Karanog showing distinctive garments, hairdos, jewellery, and either tattoos or scarification on the stomach of the seated female individual (reproduced from *Soudan, Royaumes sur le Nil*, 1997, 382), with material illustrations from the same site (strings of beads E7794 – Image: PennMuseum, and cotton textile E7511E2 – Image: Elsa Yvanez, with courtesy of the PennMuseum)

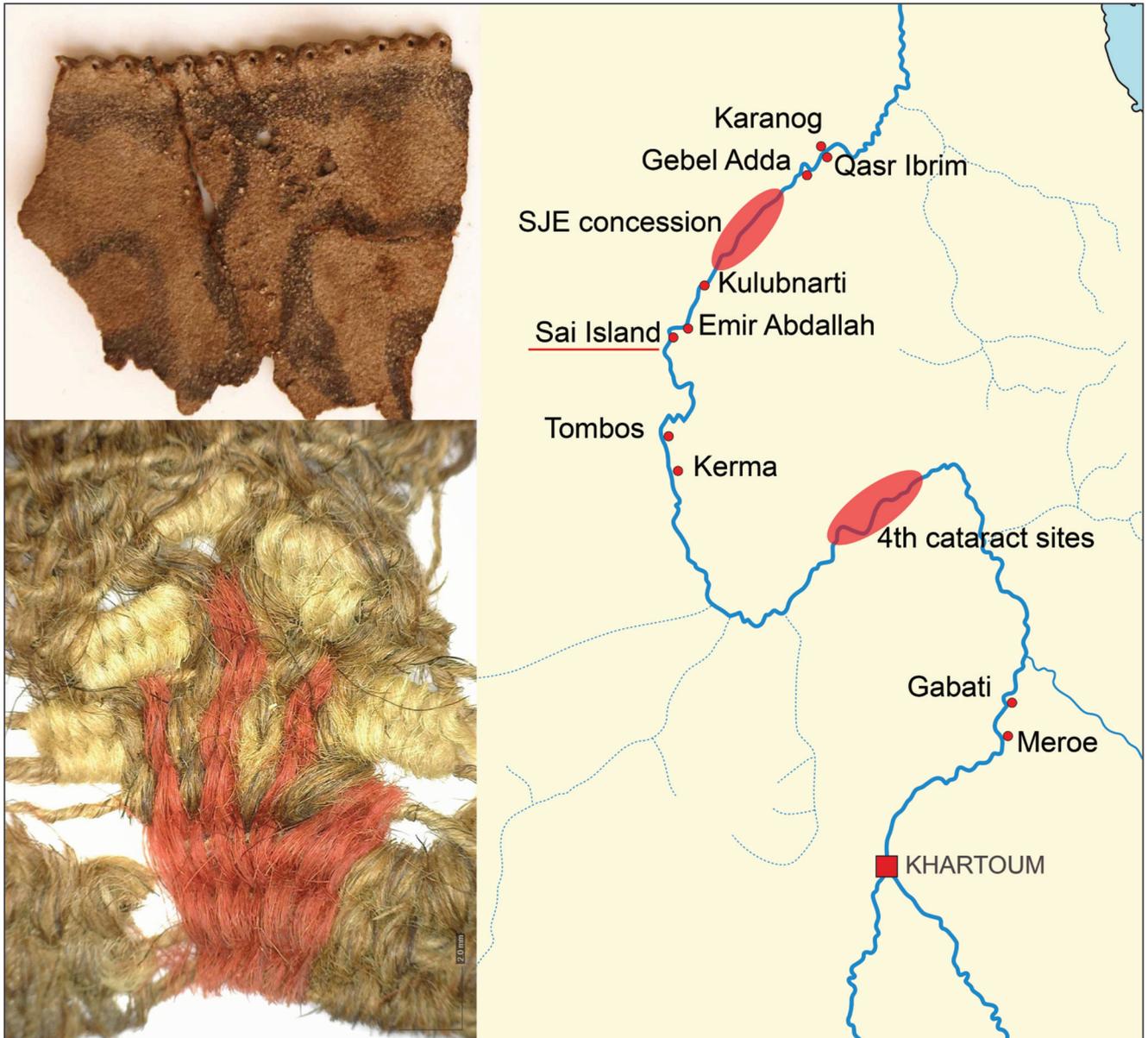
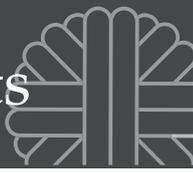


Fig. 2: Map of some key corpora, with examples of leather and wool textile fragments from garments found at Sai Island (Images and map: Elsa Yvanez/Sai Island Archaeological Mission).

foundational paper “Reading dress: the construction of social categories and identities in Bronze Age Europe” (*Journal of European Archaeology* 5.1, 1997, 93–114), *Fashioning Sudan* will conduct an archaeology of dress practices by tracking and mapping these dynamic processes through time and space, in order to unveil diverse narratives of identity in ancient Sudan. Our approach will merge different academic fields, such as archaeology, textile and animal skin research, fibre and species identification by microscopy and palaeoproteomics, and socio-cultural theory, to

develop an interdisciplinary study of garments. The project will encompass the high-resolution analysis of textile and animal skin garments, in close connection with their archaeological context.

From artefacts to interpretations, *Fashioning Sudan* will follow the material from fibre to cloth, from clothing to clothing practices in six steps: [1] Building infrastructure (databases, textile-skin-clothing terminologies, categories & concepts), integrating new theoretical debates on multiple ontologies and the decolonisation of cultural heritage; [2] Extensive



data collection to gather all information pertaining to textile and skin artefacts (such as material, craft techniques, date, shape, context); [3] Statistical data analyses to reveal the localisation, concentration, evolution of diagnostic traits; [4] Results interpretation using frameworks from economic theories and communities of practice, discussing site-catchment analyses, production, and exchange geared toward non-subsistence and comfort items; [5] Wardrobe study: garment database merging archaeological, iconographic, and textual sources; individual items and their combinations in outfits; investigation of different body concepts and sensory assemblages; GIS map of dress practices with timeline; [6] Series of case studies: stemming from semiology and mediation theory, garments will be examined as a multi-vectoral mode of communication and help reframe the notion

of past identities. Depending on each case study, we will explore diverse narratives of identity, focussing on either one aspect or on the multi-layering of identities: gender and age, social status, body and personhood in life and death, regionality, and individual vs group identities. These individual cases will finally be compared to the diachronic overview to determine if patterns emerge in specific regions and periods, drawing a dynamic understanding of diverse identities through time and space.

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Author:
elsa.yvanez@gmail.com