The Gurob Harem Palace Project

Report to the SCA on archaeological survey undertaken at Medinet el-Gurob, 4-19 April 2007

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Abstract: This article presents a preliminary report on the 2007 season of survey undertaken by the University of Liverpool at the site of Medinet el-Gurob in the Faiyum region. The principal task accomplished were mapping, surface collection and analysis of pottery, lithics and small finds, as well as further magnetometry survey in order to gain a better understanding of the subsurface remains.

Introduction

The Gurob Project is a preliminary study of the urban and funerary remains at the 'harim town' of Mi-wer (Gurob) in the Faiyum region. The principal aims of the project are (1) to produce an accurate 1:1000 map of the site as a whole, combining GIS so as to allow our growing databases of ceramics, small finds and lithics to be mapped onto the visible surface features (2) to create more detailed plans of the main points of archaeological interest in the settlement and cemeteries, (3) to produce a basic modern corpus of pottery at the site, (4) to use satellite photographs, geophysical methods and core-drilling to gain a better understanding of the subsurface material and architectural remains, as well as the relationship between the site of Gurob and its landscape and environment. The vast majority of the ceramic material covering the surface of the site dates to the mid- to late New Kingdom, affording considerable potential to analyse chronological and functional patterns across the site through the study of such material. These approaches have therefore been adopted as key elements in the strategy for exploration and analysis of the site since the 2006 season.[i]

The 2007 team consisted of fourteen members (University of Liverpool, UK, unless otherwise stated): Dr Ian Shaw, Claire Malleson, Jan Picton (University College London), Ivor Pridden (University College London), Hannah Pethen, Nadia Mahmoud, Georgina Forrest, Georgia Xekalaki, Sarah Burns, Marine Yoyotte (Sorbonne, Paris), Artur Buszek (Polish Centre, Cairo), Dawid Swiech (Polish Centre, Cairo), Ashraf el-Senussi (Curator of the Kom Aushim Museum, SCA), and our SCA inspector Mr Atef

Said Hashem. I would also like to thank Dr Zahi Hawass, Dr Ahmed Abd-el Aal (the director of the Faiyum branch of the SCA), Dr Magdi el-Ghandour in the SCA Documentation Centre, Cairo, and our inspector Mr Atef Said Hashem for their generous assistance and advice in our work at Gurob in 2007.

The nature of the site and the strategy of the 2007 work

As in the two previous seasons, our principal aims in the 2007 season of survey at Gurob were to seek confirmation of the overall layout and chronology of the settlement area of the site. We are also aiming to gain a better understanding of the duration and nature of settlement at the site, and its relationship with the surrounding landscape. The four basic strands of work at the site in 2007 were therefore pottery surface collection, lithics collection, topographical survey and magnetometry survey.

Topographical and architectural survey (Claire Malleson & Hannah Pethen)

The mapping of the topography and surface features of the site began in the 2006 season with the creation of an alphanumeric grid across the site, comprising over 150 wooden pegs and 9 iron pegs set at 20-metre intervals along grid-lines oriented east-west (numbering from '1' upwards) and north-south (labelled from the 'A' upwards through the alphabet). This grid system has now been expanded so that the 2006 alphanumeric sequence of grid-points comprises one single major 500 x 500m gridsquare (no.13) within a sequence of twelve covering the entire site (see Fig.1).

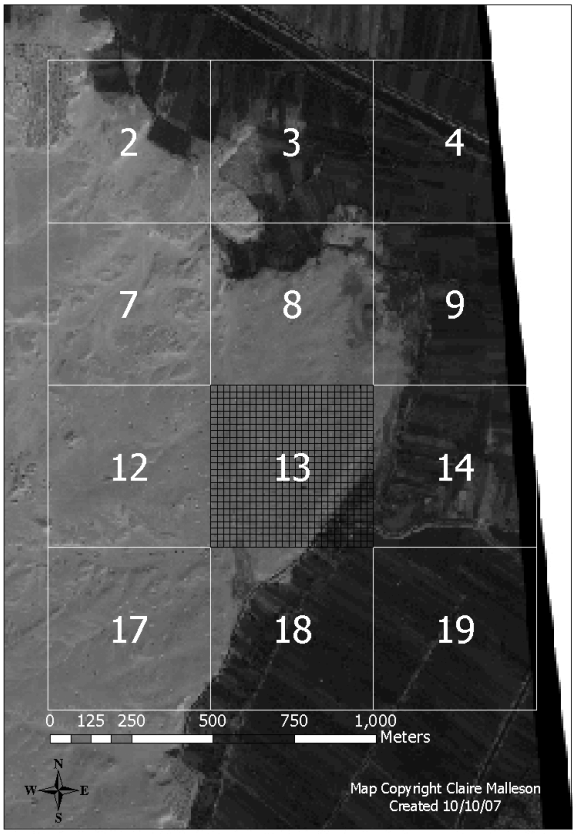


Fig.1 The series of major gridsquares across the site as a whole.

Within the same map, the locations of small finds (mainly stone tools and fragments of faience vessels) have also been recorded, alongside the positions of pottery surface collection squares and four small planned areas. Fig.2 below shows the alphanumeric grid within major gridsquare 13, with a schematic plan of the town enclosure and palace buildings superimposed in yellow (note that not all of the gridpoints have been marked out on the ground surface of the site).

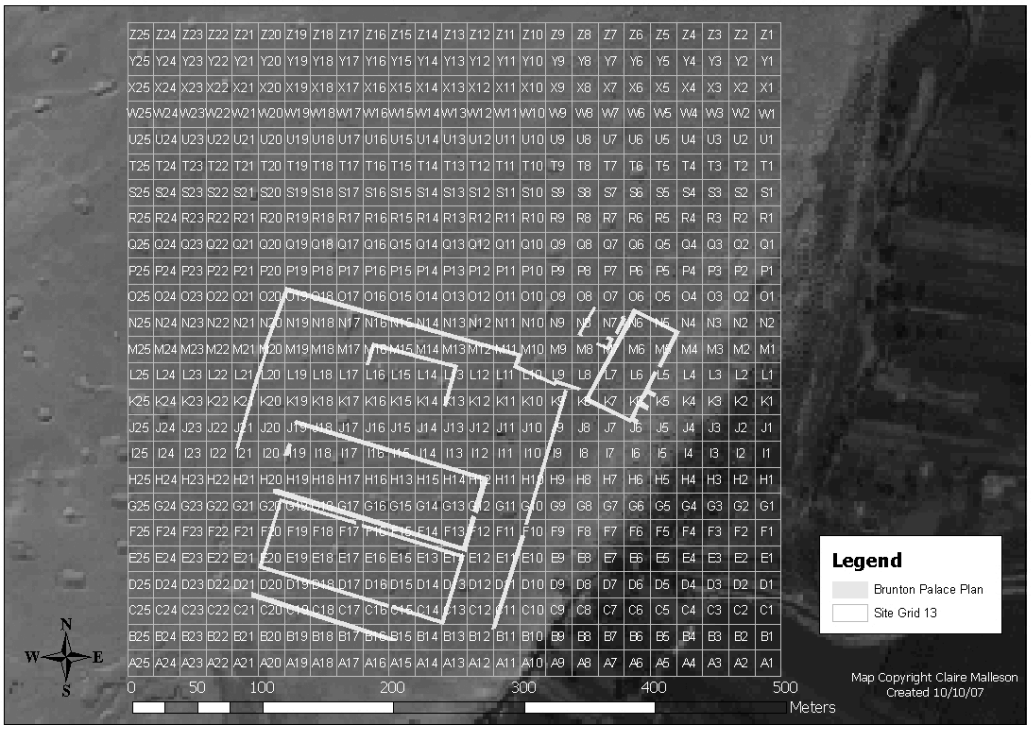


Fig.2 The series of alphanumeric grid points within gridsquare 13 at Gurob

GPS survey (Ian Shaw and Said Atef Hashem)

In addition to the topographical survey using the total station, we also took a series of points with a hand-held GPS in order to begin to define the outer edges of the site as a whole – the results of this are shown in Fig.3 below.

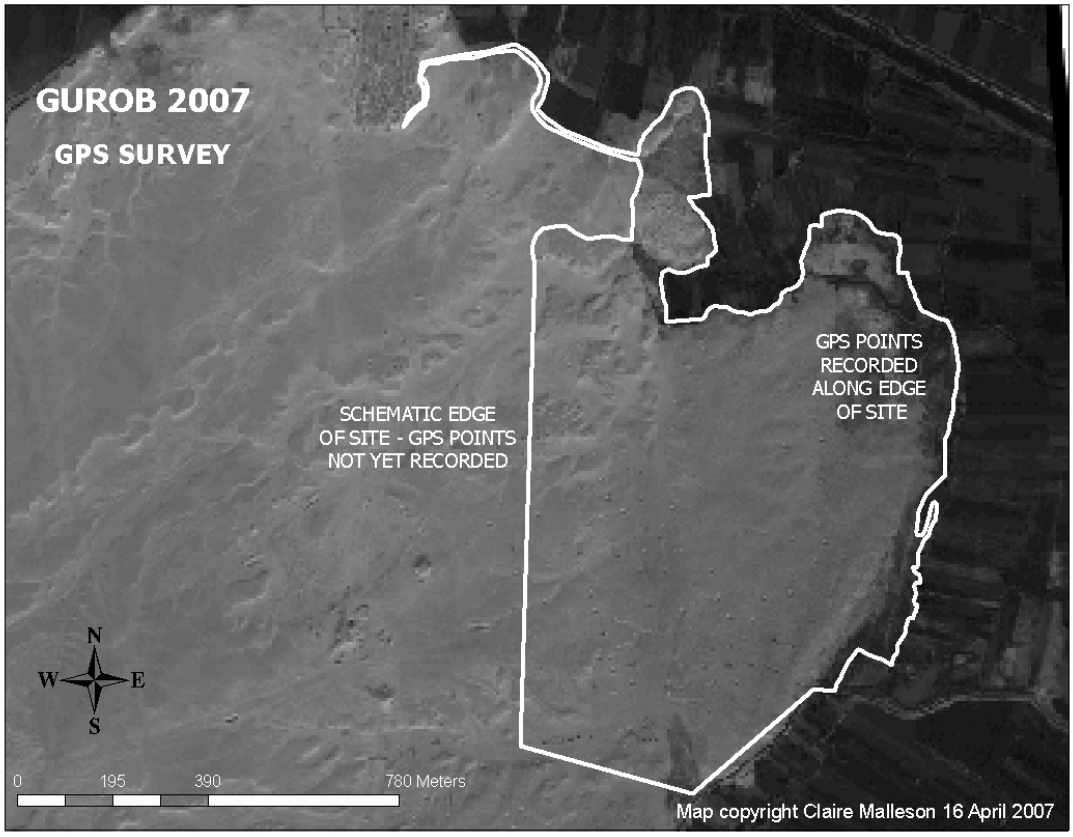


Fig.3 The series of GPS points defining the outer edges of the site (in progress)

Pottery surface collection (Jan Picton and Ashraf el-Senussi)

During the 2007 season at Gurob we continued the systematic pottery surface survey begun in the 2006 season, collecting over 51,932 potsherds (total weight c.698kg, including over 3400 diagnostics) from a number of locations throughout the site. The diagnostic sherds comprised rims, bases, handles and decorated body sherds nearly all dating to the New Kingdom (particularly the late 18th and 19th dynasties), and consisting of a variety of types and fabrics, including both Mycenaean vessels and Canaanite amphorae. There are a few examples of sherds dating to the Old Kingdom, and two that date to the early Roman period, but it has been suggested that the latter may derive from a nearby Roman site.[ii]

In the 2007 season Ashraf el-Senussi was able to establish a more statistically based study utilising the knowledge of pottery types and fabrics from all three seasons.
He was therefore able to divide the Gurob fabrics into three main categories: Nile silt fabric (mostly Nile silt B2 and a few examples of Nile silt C and E), Egyptian marl ware (dominatd by marl D, but with some examples of marl B, A2 and A3), and imported wares (comprising two main types: Canaanite amphora ware tempered with white mineral inclusions, and a Myceneaean pink ware tempered with predominantly dark mineral inclusions rocks, and normally decorated with red and brown lines on pink slip.

Table 1 shows the most common types found at Gurob, generally comprising domestic vessels used in settlements, particularly several varieties of the hemispherical bowl, which can be fairly precisely dated according to a sequence of shapes spanning the second half of the 18th Dynasty 18 and the early 19th Dynasty.

In total, we collected pottery from seven 10x10m squares (see Fig.4 below), each selected from within the grid of 20x20m squares laid out as a preliminary to the topographic and magnetometry surveys. These squares were chosen systematically in order to try to obtain a number of samples from a diverse range of functional areas within the site, e.g. square E21A from the area occupied by the presumed southern palace building, and H16B from within the northern palace building.

The rationale behind this strategy is to test the hypothesis that even after extensive excavations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, together with subsequent severe disturbance during the late 20th-century military use of the site, it should still be possible to utilise the basic spatial patterning of different pottery types and fabrics to reconstruct certain aspects of human activities at the site during the pharaonic period. Appendix 1 (below) presents the raw data from each of the pottery collection squares, and Figure 3 below shows their distribution across the site (2006 collection squares shaded in dark blue and 2007 squares in yellow).

Context	**E17C**	**E21A**	**F18A**	**G19A**	**H16B**	**H19A**	**I18A**
Types							
Hemispherical bowl	16R	150R	284R	163R	114R-1F	191R-2F	138R[iii]-1F
Round-bottom bowl	4R	22R	26R	------	10R	16R	6R
Large bowl with inner thickened rim	------	6R	2R	6R	-----	5R	------
Bowl without turned rim	------	1R	-----	------	------	-----	------
Roughly made basin	10R	63R	89R	84R	58R-2F	97R	66R
Basin + ledge rim					5R	-----	
Round-bottomed beaker	------	22R	36R	5R	13R	-----	4R
Round-bottomed globular pot with upright rim	------	17R	34R	14R	------	38R	------
Roughly made beer jar	6R and 1F	9R-1F	9R- 8F	3R – 8F	4R-2F	9R-5F	4R-5F
Neckless jar	7R –	21R	52R	37R[iv]	33R[v]	54R	48R

Context / **Types**	**E17C**	**E21A**	**F18A**	**G19A**	**H16B**	**H19A**	**I18A**
without thickened rim	3F						
Jar with almond rim	------	-----	------	-------	------	-----	5R
Meat jar	1R	-----	------	3R	2R	2R	
Marl-ware jar with concave neck	6R – 2F – 1H	4R-8F-9H	109R-2F-8H	18R– 1F – 14H	18R-12H	20R-9H	21R-10H
Short-necked jar without rolled rim and handles	------	------	7R	------	------	9R	-----
Polychrome ware	1B	4B	3B	3B	13B	8B	8B
Imported Canaanite amphorae	1R	1F	3R-5F	3H	1F	6R-2F	2R-4F
Stand with vertical support	-----	1R	------	-----	------	------	1B
Variation types	1R	3R-1F[vi]	18R[vii]	10R	------	11R	9R
Nile silt bases[viii]	------	22	37	11	17	10	8
Nile silt handles	------	-----	5	1	2	4	-----
Unidentified types[ix]	16	62	66	69	74	75	76
Pre- or post-New Kingdom types	-----	1R[x]	1F[xi]	-----	------	------	------
Total	67	428	804	453	381	573	416

Table 1. Statistical summary of the types of potsherd collected from contexts sampled in the 2007 season (R=rim, B=base, H=handle, F=??).

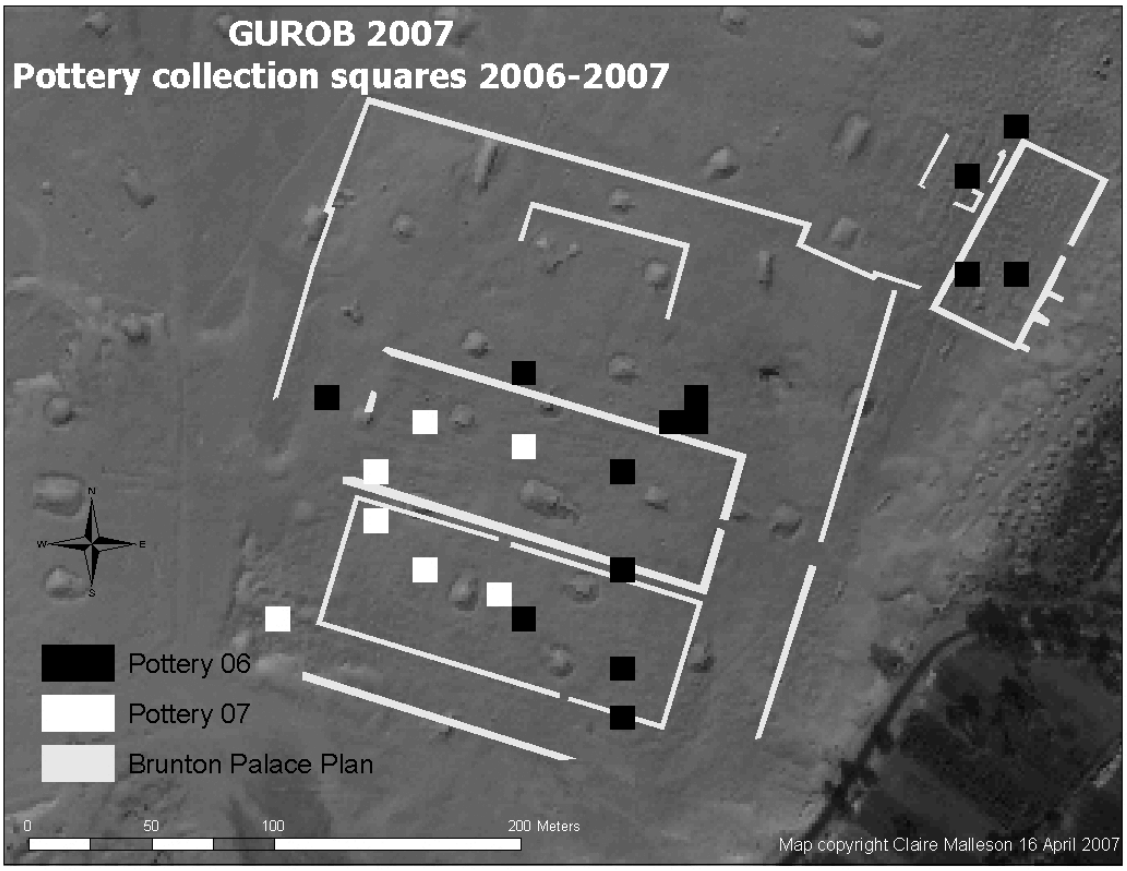


Fig.4 Pottery surface collection squares from the 2006 and 2007 season

Small finds collection (Sarah Cooke and Georgina Forrest)

As in the 2005 and 2006 seasons, small finds were collected, and their provenances recorded in three dimensions using the total station. Whereas the small finds from the two previous seasons derived primarily from the pottery collection squares and their immediate vicinity, those from the 2007 were collected over a much wider area. The major reason for this more widespread collection (and a considerably higher overall total – 218 in 2007, as opposed to 42 in 2006) was the conducting of two organised field-walks across both the main town area and the 'fort' area to the north-east, in an attempt to obtain a less distorted sense of patterning of the various categories of artefact.

Highlights among the finds were a faience ring bezel bearing the prenomen of Tutankhamun, a blue faience pendant in the form of a Bes (or perhaps Beset) figure, several fragments of calcite vessels, some fragments of blue faience vessels bearing recognisable traces of black decoration (e.g. the head of a calf), a red faience bead, a fragment of unworked turquoise, and a small green glass rod. See Fig.5 for the distribution of copper alloy fragments across the areas surveyed.

The more even spread of finds provenances has not only allowed us to examine patterns

of particular types of find across a wider area but has also demonstrated that some of the perceived patterns in the 2006 survey were dictated by repeated routes across the site taken by field-workers, and the lines of grid-points laid out by the surveying team.

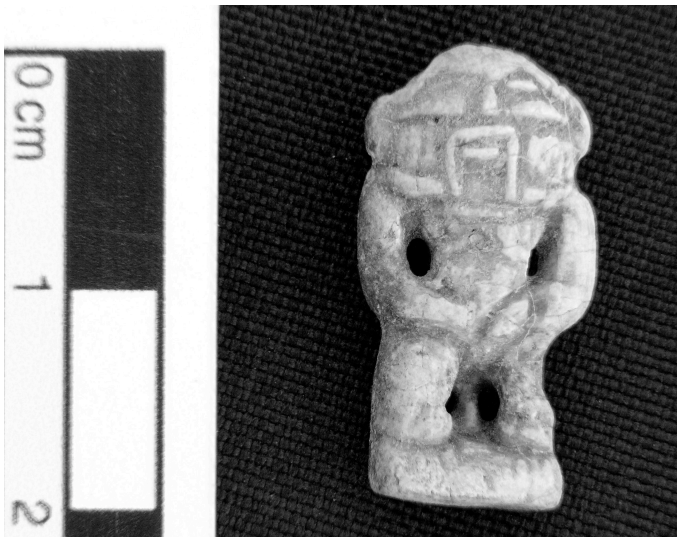
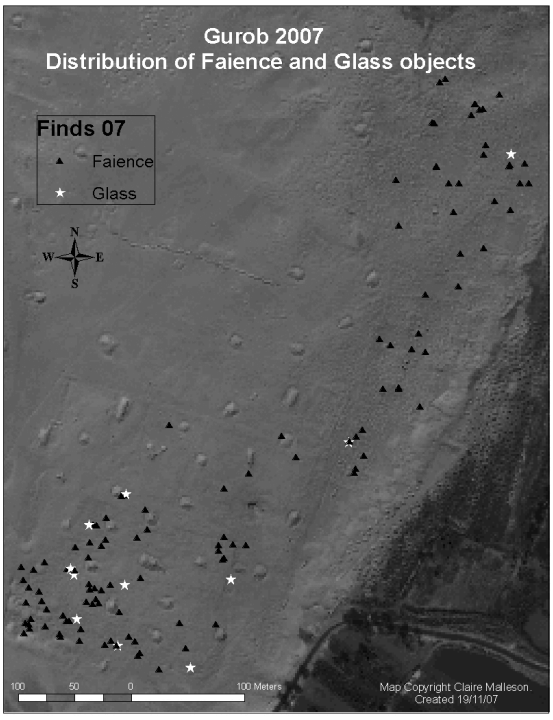


Fig.5 Blue faience pendant in the form of Bes or Beset.



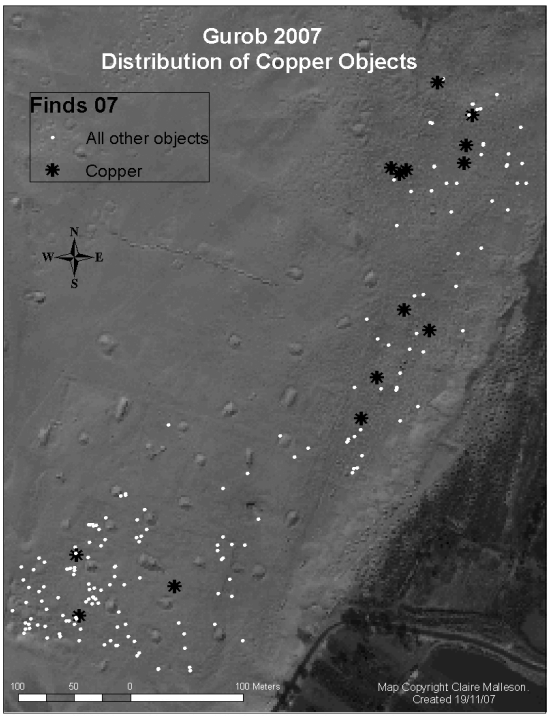


Fig.6 Distribution of copper alloy, glass and faience fragments

Lithics collection (Cordula Werschkun)

Lithics were collected both in pottery sampling squares within the palace area and squares selected for lithic sampling only within the glass kiln (or 'fort') area. In total, 116 chipped-stone artefacts, 13 ground-stone or heavy duty tools, and 26 pieces of unworked 'exotic' stone were collected.

The seven pottery sampling squares only produced 13 chipped stone artefacts and 6 pieces of exotic material. Furthermore, the chipped stone artefacts (one core and 12 flakes) show hardly any signs of core preparation or intense reduction/ raw material exploitation. In addition, 4 ground stone tools were found (1 pounder, 2 abrader fragments, 1 grinder fragment). In the same area a diorite pounder was picked up during field walking.

Three squares were selected specifically for lithic sampling. The glass kiln area was chosen because in the previous season (2006) most of the lithic small finds were collected from here. These squares contained a significantly larger number of artefacts, especially chipped stone. In addition, 20 pieces of exotic material were collected, the majority (12) in M7d. Eight ground stone tools were found, including one sandstone abrader fragment in M7d and seven tools in M5c (3 pounder/ pounder fragments, 1 abrader fragment, 1 rubber fragment, 2 grinder fragments).

Of the 103 chipped stone artefacts collected, 79 were flakes, 11 tools, 8 cores, 3 blades and 2 angular debris. A total of 92 artefacts were made from desert chert, 8 from quarried chert, and 3 of unclassifiable materials. The flakes from all three squares show moderate to strong signs of core preparation and intense reduction/ raw material exploitation. The 8 cores consist of 3 single platform, 2 double platform, 1 unifacial cobble core, the core foot of probably a triple platform core and a heavily fire-damaged core, possibly multi-platform. The following tool types are represented: 3 retouched flakes, 2 side scraper, 1 lateral retouched blade, 1 double lateral retouched blade, 1 notch, 1 bifacial chopper, 1 triangular scraper and 1 body fragment of a bifacial knife.

One should bear in mind that a significant sampling difference might exist between the lithics from the pottery sampling squares and those from the lithic sampling, as only in the latter squares was the search for lithic artefacts conducted in a systematic manner.

Fig.7 Triangular scraper from gridsquare M7d

Magnetometry survey (Dawid Swiech and Artur Buszek)

Between 6 and 14 April, David Swiech and Artur Buszek undertook a proton magnetometry survey covering *c*.2.5 hectares of the site. They focused on two principal areas:

1. The area occupied by the southern town enclosure and the southern 'palace' building,
2. The area to the north and northeast of the main town area, where Brunton and Engelbach excavated a 'glassworking' area.

In the case of Area 1, it is not possible to discern any of the internal walls of the southern palace building but there appear to be some vague traces of the southern enclosure wall of the town. With regard to Area 2, the western portion of an unexcavated glass-working kiln identified in the 2006 survey is now visible.

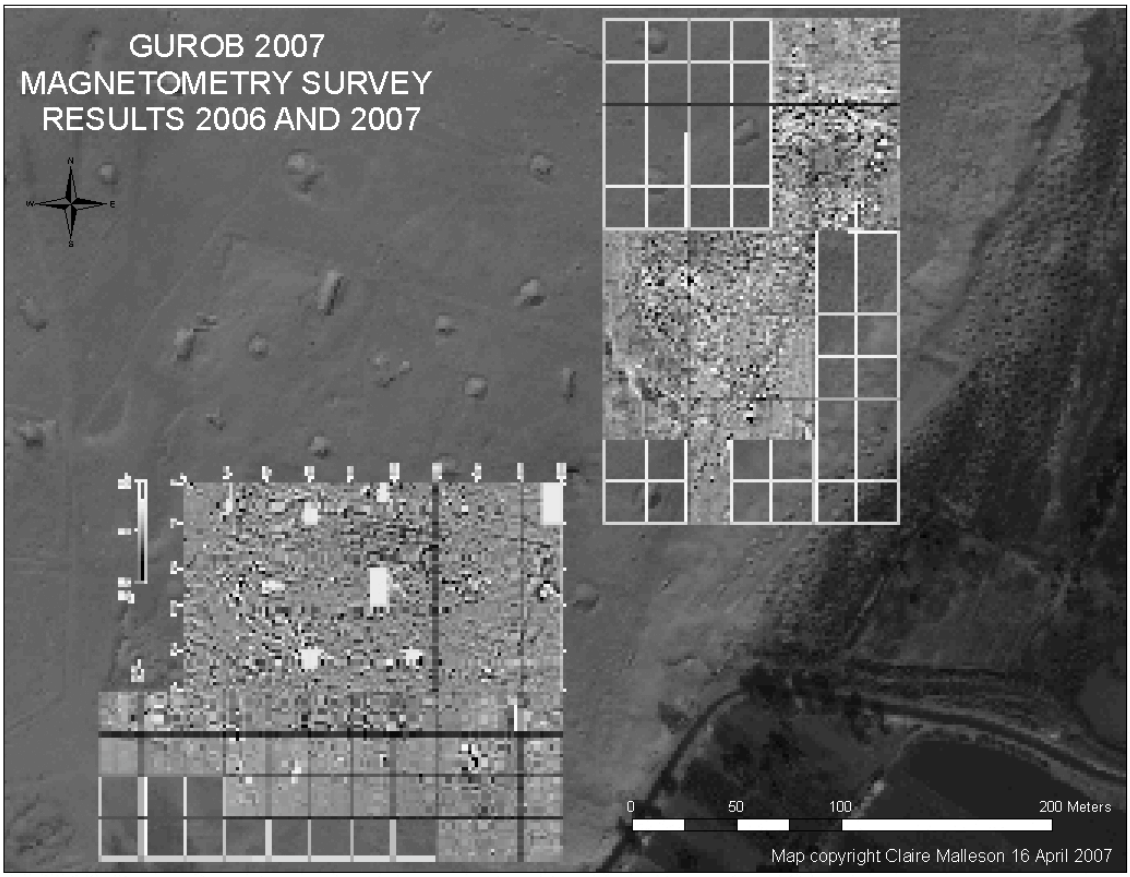


Fig.8 Magnetometry areas surveyed in 2006 and 2007

Summary

In the third season of work at Gurob we have made satisfactory progress on three elements of our overall plan for the site: mapping, pottery surface collection and geophysical survey. As well as mapping some of the basic features of the town site, we have also begun to map the cemetery area in the northern and western parts of the site. We are also now well advanced in producing a fundamental corpus of the characteristic fabrics and forms of pottery vessels at Gurob, which can then be compared with the existing New Kingdom corpora at Amarna, Memphis and other urban sites.

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Appendix 1: Pottery: raw data

Register of gridsquares from which surface pottery was collected

E21A (04 April 2007)

Marl diagnostics: 126 (2.1kg)
- Bases : 3
- Handles: 2
- Rims: 119
- Decorated and miscellaneous: 2

Nile silt diagnostics: 502 (10.7kg)
- Bases: 29
- Handles : 7
- Rims: 408
- Decorated and miscellaneous: 58

Marl body-sherds weight: 829 (12.4kg)
Nile silt body-sherds weight: 6358 (71.3kg)

E17C (04 April 2007)

Marl diagnostics: 4 (0.25kg)
- Bases : 0
- Handles: 0
- Rims: 4
- Decorated and miscellaneous: 0

Nile silt diagnostics: 74 (1.5kg)
- Bases: 8
- Handles : 1
- Rims: 59
- Decorated and miscellaneous: 6

Marl body-sherds weight: 140 (2.0kg)
Nile silt body-sherds weight: 1637 (17.2kg)

F18A (05 & 06 April 2007)

Marl diagnostics: 49 (2.3kg)
- Bases : 2
- Handles: 9
- Rims: 26
- Decorated and miscellaneous: 2

Nile silt diagnostics: 764 (14.1kg)
- Bases: 67
- Handles : 4
- Rims: 616
- Decorated and miscellaneous: 77

Marl body-sherds weight: 993 (14.0kg)
Nile silt body-sherds weight: 8595 (114.2kg)

G19A (06 April 2007)

Marl diagnostics: 19 (1.3kg)
- Bases : 0
- Handles: 0
- Rims: 19
- Decorated and miscellaneous: 0

Nile silt diagnostics: 454 (11.1kg)
- Bases: 29
- Handles : 11
- Rims: 346
- Decorated and miscellaneous: 68

Marl fabric weight: 529 (9.9kg)
Nile silt fabric weight: 5513 (89.1kg)

H19A (08 April 2007)

Marl diagnostics: 38 (1.55kg)
- Bases : 2
- Handles: 9
- Rims: 27
- Decorated and miscellaneous: 0

Nile silt diagnostics: 596 (11.2kg)
- Bases: 32
- Handles: 5
- Rims: 489
- Decorated and miscellaneous: 64

Marl fabric weight: 1026 (17.55kg)
Nile silt fabric weight: 8222 (105.45kg)
Canaanite = 6

H16B (09 April 2007)

Marl diagnostics: 39 (1.4kg)
- Bases : 0
- Handles: 11
- Rims: 28
- Decorated and miscellaneous: 0

Nile silt diagnostics: 363 (8.65kg)
- Bases: 37
- Handles: 4
- Rims: 268
- Decorated and miscellaneous: 54

Marl fabric weight: 1125 (13.2kg)
Nile silt fabric weight: 6318 (79.5kg)

I18A (12 April 2007)

Marl diagnostics: 44 (1.18kg)
- Bases : 3
- Handles: 7
- Rims: 33
- Decorated and miscellaneous: 0

Nile silt diagnostics: 355 (7.81kg)
- Bases: 22
- Handles: 3
- Rims: 272
- Decorated and miscellaneous: 58

Marl fabric weight: 543 (6.9kg)
Nile silt fabric weight: 6677 (70.65kg)
Canaanite = 1

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[i] Preliminary reports on the 2005 and 2006 seasons have been published in the following articles: I. Shaw, 'Gurob: the key to unlocking an Egyptian harem?', *Current World Archaeology* 23 (June/July 2007), 12-19; I. Shaw, 'Seeking the Ramesside royal harem: new fieldwork at Medinet el-Gurob', M. Collier and S. Snape (eds), *Ramesside Studies presented to Prof. Kenneth Kitchen*, ed. M. Collier & S. Snape (Liverpool, 2007).
[ii] Pers. comm. A. el-Senussi.
[iii] One of these rims bears blue-painted decoration.
[iv] One bearing blue-painted decoration.
[v] All but one being Nile silt.
[vi] Footed base from a large jar or basin.
[vii] One of these is an Old Kingdom bowl with re-curved rim.
[viii] This category consists of sherds for which the original shape of the vessel is unclear shape: most are round but others are occasionally ring-shaped or flat.
[ix] This category includes small diagnostic sherds that are difficult to identify, and body shards that have been incorrectly identified as diagnostics.
[x] Rim sherd from a Roman cooking pot. Base of an Old Kingdom table bowl.
[xi] Base of an Old Kingdom table bowl.