

CENTRE D'ARCHÉOLOGIE MÉDITERRANÉENNE
DE L'ACADÉMIE POLONAISE DES SCIENCES

ÉTUDES et TRAVAUX
XIX
2001

BOGDAN ŻURAWSKI

*Makurian Defensive System
in the Southern Dongola Reach
(6th–14th century)*

In 1997, forty years after Prof. Kazimierz Michałowski completed his pioneering *prospection du terrain* in Lower Nubia (the first Polish archaeological engagement in Nubia), the *Polish Archaeological Joint Expedition to the Middle Nile* took to the field with an aim of conducting an archaeological survey in Upper Nubia. Between 1997–2000 it reconnoitred the right bank of the Nile between Old Dongola and Ez-Zuma at a highly intense level. This endeavour, otherwise known as *The Southern Dongola Reach Survey*,¹ was aimed at recording and assessing the significance of all archaeological and historical sites along a two km wide strip of the right bank, as well as reconstructing variations in settlement pattern within this from Middle Paleolithic to quite recent times.² Historic sites, with the walls either preserved or recognisable, as a rule were photographed from a remote-controlled camera suspended from a kite. All aerial photographs presented below are the result of computer scanning and assemblage of these photographs.

Among the 900 sites recorded and documented by the SDRS on the right bank of the river there are imposing strongholds dated to the Christian period, as well as lightly fortified enclosures, monasteries, forts and watch-towers. Together they constituted a part of the defensive system of the Kingdom of Dongola. The right bank chain of strongholds is paralleled by a similar system on the left bank.

The location pattern of the Christian strongholds on the right bank of the Nile between Old Dongola and Ez-Zuma appears uniform. The average distance between fortresses is c. 15–20 km a fair distance of one day's march for infantry.³ Together with the left bank strongholds, they constitute a well-planned and masterly executed chain of fortifications guarding the populous regions of southern Dar Dongola and Dar Shaik'iyia. Together with the fortified upper city of Old Dongola and Fourth Cataract forts, they constitute an effective defence system against the nomadic tribes of the Nubian Desert, mostly of the Beja stock, that had been harassing the right bank settlers since early Kushite times.

Despite lack of survey on the left bank to date, it seems that this too had its own defensive system, consisting of chain of fortresses constructed mainly of mud-brick. Due to the population growth and agriculture spread, the left bank fortresses now barely survive.

¹ The Southern Dongola Reach is a high priority area for archaeological research in the Middle Nile region. It lies between the better known and archaeologically rich districts centred around Gebel Barkal and Letti Basin. The area served as a connection between the Red Sea and Wadi Howar, the main East-West thoroughfare in the Libyan Desert linking the Nile Valley with inner Africa. Assessing the extent and value of these East-West contacts and the role played by the Southern Dongola Reach in changing trading networks is one of the main objectives of the SDRS. While no systematic survey of the study area as a whole has been undertaken so far some historical monuments are known and several archaeological sites have come to light due to the visits to the region done by Sudan Antiquities Service officers, modern archaeologist and researchers as well as 19th cent. travellers.

² The Southern Dongola Reach Survey (SDRS) is a joint mission of the Research Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Michałowski Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw and the Poznań Archaeological Museum. It is a wide-ranging archaeological survey and excavation project with integral GPS/GIS mapping, archaeo-zoological, ethnographical, ethno-agricultural and anthropological components.

³ The shortest distance is 10 km, the longest is more than 30 km.

However, travellers' reports confirm the existence of once formidable forts e.g. at Gabrija,⁴ Ambukol,⁵ Hettani,⁶ Ganetti.⁷ Wilkinson's drawing⁸ of a fortress at Tanqasi that Monneret de Villard calls Tangasi Es-Sug (= Tangasi Er-Ruweis on Sheet 45–F)⁹ according to Margaret Shinnie¹⁰ refers to Tangasi Gezira.¹¹

It is a quite different a situation on the right bank, where at least seven fortresses still stands, some in remarkable good state of preservation. The desolate character of the right bank, lack of habitation centres of paramount importance and scarcity of cultivable grounds are the main factors behind the remarkable survival of the fortresses at Abkur, Ed-Deiga, Ed-Diffar, Bakhit and Old Dongola. Since the left bank was more populous and agriculturally more developed, we might expect even stronger defences there; however, the factors listed above seem to have totally erase them to ground level.

The defence pattern so far reconstructed on both banks of the Nile deny the thesis that only the right bank was exposed to the enemy attack, while the left bank remained relatively calm. The left bank strongholds, in fact, seem to be of later foundation than those on the right bank, which are mostly Early Christian in date. However, the nomadic threat was felt equally on both banks by the 12th century.

The construction methodology, materials used and the so-called "sally gates" (= posterns) liken the right bank strongholds to each other.¹² Some fortresses that stood at the verge of the river (Old Dongola,¹³ Ed-Diffar and Bakhit) have the riverward side lightly outfitted or virtually unprotected. As a general rule, all the fortresses were in some way "open" to the river.¹⁴

A church seems to be an edifice *sine qua non* in Christian fortress in Nubia. Church remains are, or are reported to be, present with all the right bank fortresses in the Southern

⁴ LINANT DE BELLEFONDS, Journal d'un Voyage à Méroé dans les Années 1821 et 1821, *Sudan Antiquities Service Occasional Papers* 4, 1958 [= SASOP 4], pp. 35–36.

⁵ The fortress is described by Linant de Bellefonds but its location is not named, according to Jean Mazuel its was Ambukol cf. J. MAZUEL, L'Oeuvre Géographique de Linant de Bellefonds. Étude de Géographie Historique, *Publications de la Société Royale de Géographie d'Égypte*, Le Caire 1957 [= L'Oeuvre] p. 47. M. Shinnie identifies the place as Gabriya, cf. LINANT DE BELLEFONDS, SASOP 4, p. 35, note 3.

⁶ J. RUSSEGER, *Reisen in Europa, Asien und Afrika* II, part 3, Stuttgart 1844 [= Reisen], p. 36: "Nachdem wir die grosse Insel Tesena und die am linken Ufer auf Sandsteinfelsen liegenden Trümmer der Feste Haddana, welche der Mammeluken-Bey Ibrahim zerstörte, passiert hatten, langten wir gegen Mittagszeit am Dschebel Diffar am rechten Ufer an, wo sich ähnliche Ruinen auf den gegenwärtig vom Sande der Wüste dedeckten Felsen befinden" (*loc. cit.*).

⁷ J. H. BREASTED, Second Preliminary Report of the Egyptian Expedition, *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* XXV, 1, 1908 [= Report], p. 39; E. RÜPPEL, *Reisen in Nubien, Kordofan und dem peträtschen Arabien*, Frankfurt am Main 1829 [= Reisen], p. 62; A.E.W. GLEICHEN, *The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan* 1, London 1905 [= Sudan], p. 315.

⁸ J. G. WILKINSON, Unpublished manuscript at Bodleian Library, Dep. e. 66, p. 57.

⁹ U. MONNERET DE VILLARD, *La Nubia medioevale I*, Le Caire 1935 [= Nubia], p. 252.

¹⁰ LINANT DE BELLEFONDS, SASOP 4, p. 35, note 1.

¹¹ Wilkinson's handwriting is hardly legible, however, the relief from Gebel Barkal drawn on the facing page suggests the left bank Tanqasi es-Suq.

¹² Especially the fortresses in Dar Shaik'iyia bear analogies to each other.

¹³ W. GODLEWSKI, *Old Dongola*. Kom A, 1999, *PAM* XI, 1999 [= PAM XI], p. 206.

¹⁴ It applies also to the fortified Upper City of Dongola, cf. Fig. 1.

Dongola Reach. They were attached to the external side of the curtain wall at Ed-Diffar and Old Dongola. The church in Ed-Deiga, although having totally disappeared over the last 50 years, is amply and convincingly reported in the reports of travellers and an SAS officer report.

As a rule, Christian fortresses in the Nile Valley between the Third and Fourth Cataract were located close to the river, regardless of their present relationship to the riverbank. Access to the river, the only reliable supply route, seems essential to the functioning of the defensive system as the whole. Attackers apparently were not expected from the river, resulting in that side of the fortress being virtually unprotected, e.g. at Bakhit, Old Dongola and probably Ed-Diffar. During a siege the communication with the outside world relied on river transport.

The riverbound location of the Southern Dongola Reach strongholds left them extremely vulnerable to river drift. If the Nile receded due to the natural causes (e.g. constant drift of the dunes coming from the Nubian Desert, silting of the river channel, series of low floods etc.) the affected fortress was doomed. Paradoxically enough, the Christian strongholds in Dongola Reach stood well against the enemy but fell easy prey to such natural and anthropogenic disasters as river recession (Abkur (Istabel), Ed-Deiga), and external wall and interior building wall removal to gain access to layers of natural fertilizer (*maroq*) and building materials. The vulnerability of the strongholds to dunes drift (which drive the river southwards) increases considerably in the so-called “Debba Bend” where the course of the Nile is square with the mostly northern wind.

Insofar as archaeological evidence recorded during the SDRS permits interpretation, it seems evident that the Makurian defensive system was two-tier. Forts or strongholds of lesser importance and lighter defences were positioned between those of larger and stronger construction. Their aims were to control river traffic and to provide shelter to the local population against small marauding bands. Larger fortresses were scheduled to withstand prolonged siege, and to keep the nomadic tribes in check by means of cavalry units stationed within. It seems that the fortified enclosures of Selib and Sinada played such a subordinate role in the system. They filled the huge defensive gap of 40 km between the nearest fortress of Old Dongola and Istabel. Besides, Sinada and Selib introduce the problem of fortified monasteries that have a role of their own in the general safeguarding of the Kingdom of Dongola.

On the basis of existing evidence, travellers’ reports and aerial photographs, the right bank defensive system in the Southern Dongola Reach seems to consist of the following strongholds and fortified enclosures:

Old Dongola, Tangasi, Banganarti (Sinada),¹⁵ Selib,¹⁶ Abkur (Istabel), Diffar, Ed-Deiga,

¹⁵ Three metres thick walls of the complex in Banganarti insinuate a fortress-like structure, however the epigraphic testimony (Khandak stela red again by Adam Łajtar, is strongly suggestive for the monastic complex (fortified monastery?).

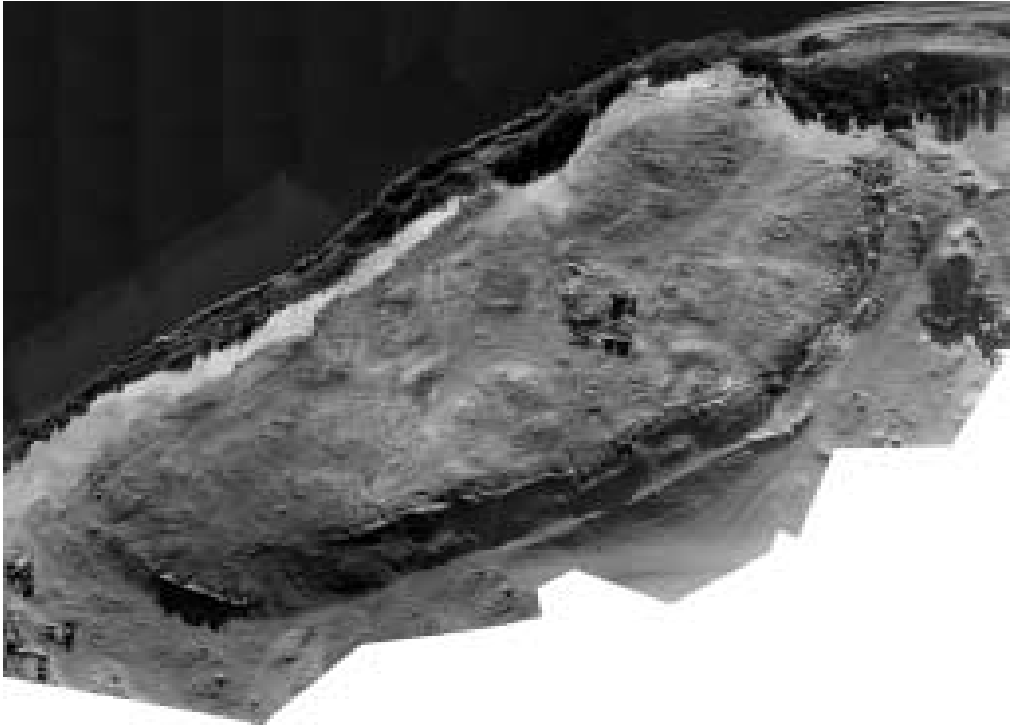
¹⁶ Survey of the Kom in Selib, that is to some extent similar to Sinada, revealed traces of stone enclosure wall and lime plastered, red brick structures inside the walls (with scarce ceramic scatter on surface).

Bakhit, Ez-Zuma, Kadjabi. The left bank strongholds, preserved only in early photographs¹⁷ and in travellers' reports will not be discussed until they are surveyed at some future date.

OLD DONGOLA

The excavations in Old Dongola began in 1964 under K. Michałowski; (S. Jakobielski became dig director in 1966). The Old Dongola fortifications have been investigated since 1990 by W. Godlewski. The annual (recently bi-annual) progress is promptly published in *PAM*. There is no need here either to repeat or summarize his many and far-reaching conclusions.

I would like only to modestly propose some conclusions reached through analysis of the composite aerial photographs, perusal of some lesser known travellers' reports and (unpublished) drawings made at Old Dongola by John Gardiner Wilkinson.



1. Old Dongola (fortified "Upper City"). Computer montage of low-altitude aerial photographs. (Phot. B. Żurawski).

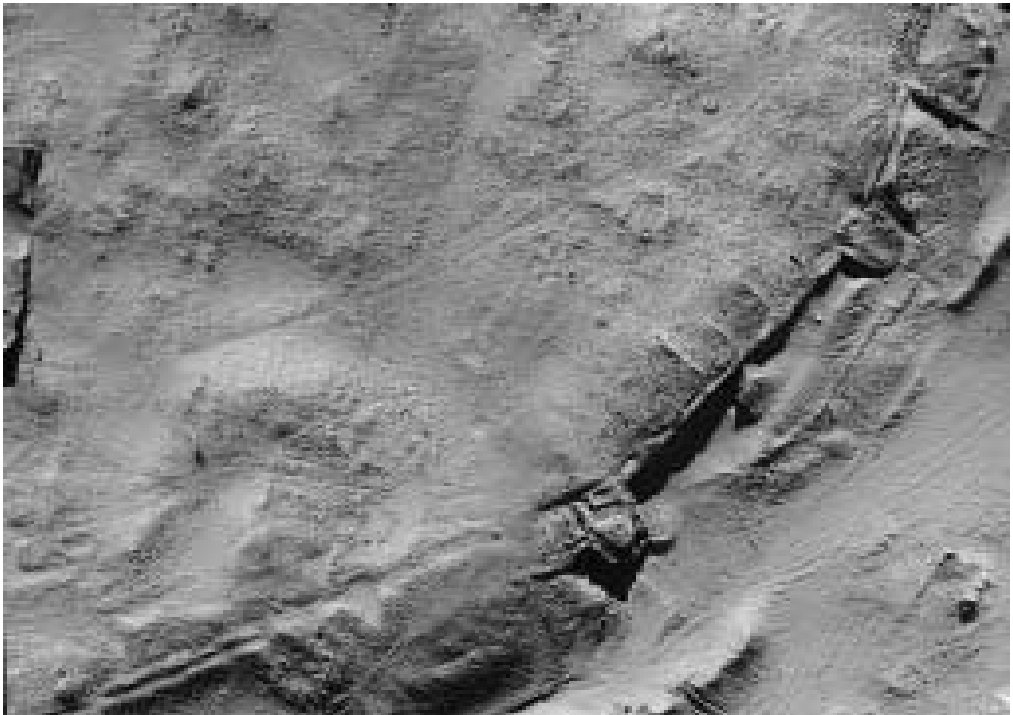
¹⁷ Cf. photographs of "a Roman (*sic!*) fort opposite Merowe" kept in Sudan Archive (Durham University Library): SAD. 845/8/36 and SAD. 845/8/35.

Dismantling of the Dongola fortifications gained momentum at the beginning of the 20th century, after the area was economically upgraded and new settlers arrived. The state of the curtain walls as seen by Crowfoot in 1903 resemble far more that drawn by Wilkinson than when registered during modern research. Three N-W bastions had disappeared between Crowfoot's two visits to the site:

"I made rough notes about the condition of the buildings (I find in my notes about Old Dongola mention of three bastions northwest of the town which had disappeared when I visited it later: they were built of un-hewn stone like those at Khandak), collected potsherds from old sites in the Letti and elsewhere and any traditions that were floating about-all that was then practicable as we had neither money nor staff to make surveys or excavations to fill a museum which did not exist."¹⁸

Arkell, writing about the "*fortified residence of the old Christian kings of Dongola*" apparently refers to these bastions being destroyed between 1919 and 1939:

"The fortified residence of the old Christian kings of Dongola has been destroyed down to ground level in the last 20 years by people quarrying it for stone blocks."¹⁹



2. Old Dongola. Fragment of the curtain wall with bastions. Low-altitude, vertical aerial photograph. (Phot. B. Żurawski).

¹⁸ J. W. CROWFOOT, *Early Days, 1903–31*, *KUSH* 1, 1954 [= *Early Days*], p. 54.

¹⁹ A.J. ARKELL, *Report for the year 1939 of the Antiquities Service and Museums in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, Khartoum 1940*, [= *Report 1939*], pp. 12–13. SAD. A34/225, SAD. A34/244 and SAD. 8/23/20 taken between 1906 and 1914 reveal still remarkable good state of preservation of the so-called Abandoned Village of Old Dongola.

To our great surprise the Evliya Çelebi's description of Old Dongola contained in his "Travels" is astonishingly accurate:

"Die Festung ist ein alter, viereckiger, langgestreckter Bau am Ostufer des Nils, aus roten Ziegeln und ohne Graben. Sie besitzt drei Tore, von denen eines auf den Nil geht. Im Innern befinden sich insgesamt sechshundertfünfzig nubische Häuser, die aus ungebrannten Backstein erbaut sind; sieben Freitagsmoscheen, neun Gebetshäuser und sechs Schulen. Andere Bauten gibt es nicht. Die ganze Festung steht auf einem steilen Felsen. Der Königspalast in der Festung ist aus Ziegeln erbaut ebenso die Herberge, in der wir unterkamen. Schönere Gebäude als diese gibt es in der Stadt nicht. Aber ausserhalb der Festung stehen am Ostufer an die dreitausend nubische Häuser, die einen aus Rohziegeln, andere aus Schilf und andere wie Gartenhäuschen aus Reisig errichtet."²⁰

The locations of three gates mentioned by Çelebi have not yet been archaeologically ascertained, but Godlewski recently has identified the "Rivergate".²¹



3. Old Dongola. Oblique aerial photograph. (Phot. B. Żurawski).

²⁰ E. PROKOSCH, *Ins Land der geheimnisvollen Func*, Graz 1994 [= Func], pp. 150–151.

²¹ GODLEWSKI, *PAM XI*, p. 206.

TANQASI

The fortress on Tanqasi Island is mentioned only by Evliya Çelebi who visited it after his sojourn in Old Dongola:

“(…) Nachdem wir acht Stunden den Nil entlang geritten waren, kamen wir nach

Tangusi

Einer grossen, aus Ziegeln erbauten Festung auf einer Insel im Nil, die nahe beim Westufer liegt. (...) Wie Dunkule hat auch diese Burg drei Tore, steht aber nicht wie jene auf einem Felsen, sondern ist auf Erdreich in der Form eines Reckeckes errichtet und gehört zu Funcistan.”²²

Margaret Shinnie refers to the fortress on Tanqasi Island²³ as that was mentioned by Wilkinson about 1850, but without stating the exact provenance of this information – it could rather concerned the fortress in Tanqasi Es-Sug drawn by him in 1848.²⁴

BANGANARTI

Selib²⁵ and possibly Sinada²⁶ in Banganarti region (where a three-metre thick wall provided with rounded towers was revealed around the central *kom*) were fortified sites of importance. Both were dependent in some manner on the bigger fortress at Gabriya,²⁷ on the left bank of the Nile. They are too lightly defended, to give shelter to the local population in the event of a more serious attack.

The appropriation of the enclosure in Selib remains a mystery. The enigma of an enclosure in Banganarti was slightly elucidated after Adam Łajtar found a reference to a monastery of Banganarti in the stela from Khandak,²⁸ which suggests the existence of a monastery in (B)enganarti. Does it refer to the *kom* in Sinada? There is no other monastery-like structure in the whole area of Banganarti. Such an appropriation would suggest that the similar site of Selib also housed a monastery.

The right bank *mantiqa* of Banganarti, as both name and local oral tradition suggest, was an island within the living memory. The fortified *kom* of Sinada, once sat on the river

²² PROKOSCH, Func, p. 154.

²³ LINANT DE BELLEFONDS, SASOP 4, p. 35, n. 1.

²⁴ WILKINSON, Dep. e. 66, p. 57.

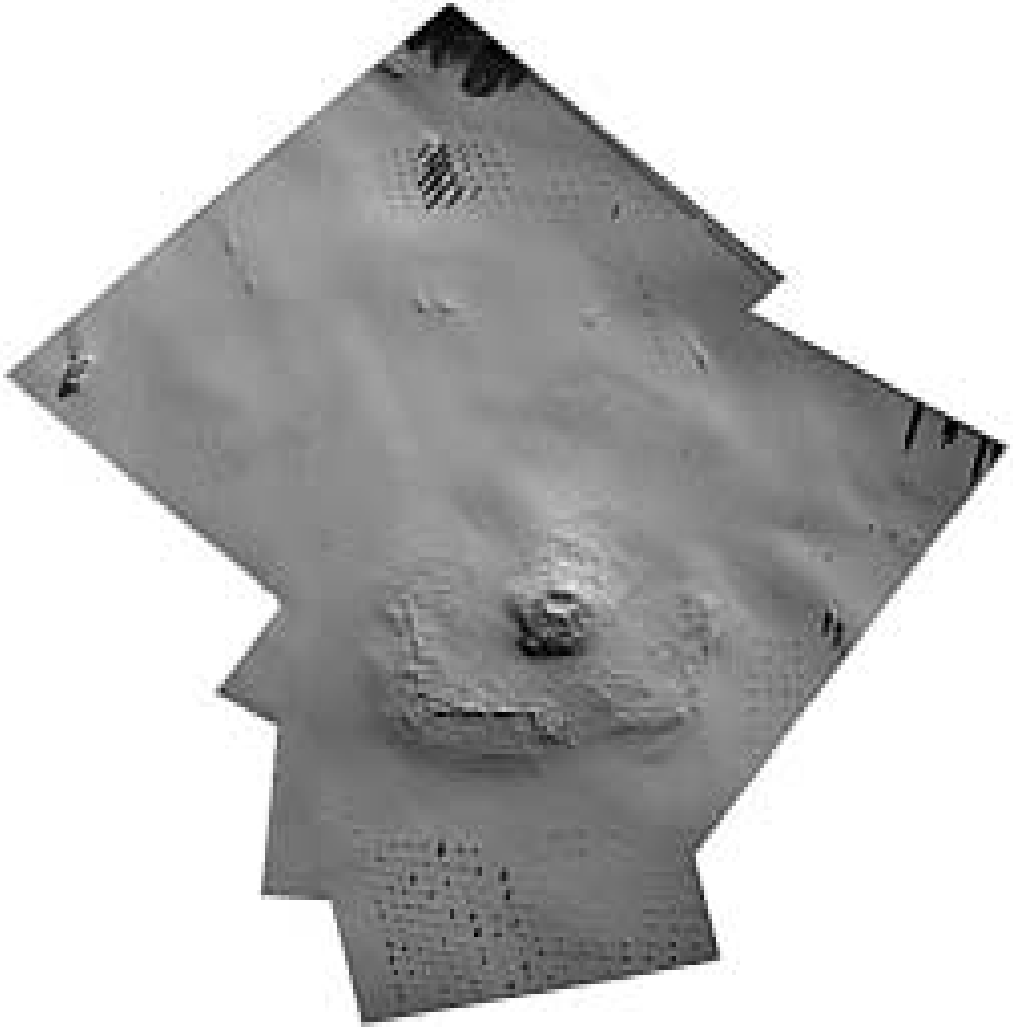
²⁵ Cf. K. GRZYMSKI, Archaeological Reconnaissance in Upper Nubia, Toronto 1987 [= Reconnaissance], p. 9; D.N. EDWARDS, Archaeology and Settlement in upper Nubia in the 1st Millenium A.D, Oxford 1989 [= Settlement], p. 109.

²⁶ Cf. GRZYMSKI, Reconnaissance, p. 11; EDWARDS, Settlement, p. 109.

²⁷ In Gabriya Linant de Bellefonds had seen ruins that he took for a monastery but later, after hesitation decided to label them a fortress:

“Il était bâti en briques crues et en pierres brutes et avait aux angles de petites tourelles. Je n’y vis aucun reste d’église. Autour de cet endroit il y a beaucoup de décombres et je pense que cet endroit est un site fort ancien; j’y ai vu un morceau de muraille qui est fait de briques semblables à celles que faisaient les Égyptiens”, LINANT DE BELLEFONDS, SASOP 4, pp. 35–36.

²⁸ MONNERET DE VILLARD, Nubia I, pp. 242–243.



4. Sinada (Banganarti). The central *kom* as seen from above in 1999, before excavation started. Computer montage of four low-altitude aerial photographs. (Phot. B. Zurawski).

bank at the mouth of the *wadi* that still becomes partly submerged during a high Nile flood. (The last time the Nile entered Khor Jerf Al-Mardi in 1994, and part of Hammur Abbasija village that lies on both banks of the *chor* was destroyed).



5. Selib. Fortified enclosure. Computer montage of three low-altitude aerial photographs. (Phot. B. Żurawski).

Murals were reported at Sinada in 1993. Thick lime plaster suggests a church building within the walled precinct at both Sinada and Selib. The hemicycles in the exterior walls suggests an affinity between Sinada and the Holy Trinity Monastery near Old Dongola.

The similarities between Selib and Sinada are manifold. The evidently Early Christian complex almost touches the Transitional Period tumuli at Sinada, whilst at Selib the tumuli field is on the opposite side of Gebel El-Alim. Was this accidental, or were some early monasteries (or fortified settlements) associated with the conversion of nomads to Christianity? The settlement pattern of post-Meroitic graveyards and Early Christian settlements/monasteries stress a peaceful co-habitation of the sedentary population and the nomads /semi-nomads living on the desert edge.



6. Sinada (Banganarti). The central *kom* as seen in 2001, after excavation started. Computer montage of four aerial photographs and an architectural drawing (the church within the walls). (Phot. B. Żurawski).

ABKOR (ISTABEL)

The Christian fortress in Abkur is marked on Sheet 45-E Map of the Sudan as Istabel.²⁹ (According to Adam Łajtar, the toponym *Istabel* is rooted in Greek *στάβλον* via Latin *stabulum*, producing the English “*stable*”, Old French “*estable*” and French “*étable*”). A layer of horse dung several metres thick is visible here and there in the exposed stratigraphy of the fortress, apparently having accumulated when a cavalry unit was stationed there, provides some justification for this etymology.

The first description of Abkur was composed by Evliya Çelebi in 1672:

“Abkor, einer aus Ziegeln erbauten kleinen viereckigen Festung am Ostufer des Nils, mit zweihundert Reishütten und einer schäbigen Moschee. Kommandant ist ein Adeliger aus Funcistan namens Körce (Gürce?). Die Festung besitzt zwei Tore, aber es gibt dort weder Kaufläden noch ein Bad, eine Herberge oder einen Weingarten, und die Bewohner sind niemandem feind. Es sind dunkelhäutige Nubier mit hellen Gesichtern”.³⁰

²⁹ The fortress hill is locally known as Gebel El-Gren after *sheikh* El-Gren who is said to live there in the last century.

³⁰ PROKOSCH, Func, pp. 161–162.



7. Istabel. The fortress photographed from the RAF plane in the 1930s. (After: D. N. EDWARDS, Aerial Photographs of Archaeological Sites in Northern Sudan, *The Sudan Archaeological Research Society, Newsletter*, 11, 1996, Pl. 5).

We owe a superb account of Abkor to Linant de Bellefonds, who portrayed the fortress in 1820 as little different than its appearance today. Abkur is a rare example of a Nubian fortress that suffered minimal destruction over the past 200 years.

“Lorsque je fus à Abcot, je fus visiter ces ruines que l’on voit du fleuve, sur une petite montagne éloignée de près de deux milles des bords du Nil. La plaine qui est entre est couverte de broussailles et d’arbres. Il y a aussi plusieurs décombres. Ces ruines sont celles d’une petite ville. Elle était située très bien sur le haut d’une petite montagne, et entourée d’une muraille qui est partie en pierre, partie en brique crues. Les murailles n’ont pas de forme régulière, mais elles sont flanquées, comme à l’ordinaire, de petites tours et de petits bastions. Du côté du nord, elle est plus élevée que des autres tant la muraille que la montagne. La ville va en pente du côté du sud et c’est de ce côté qu’est la porte qui est très petite; à droite, en entrant, il y a une très belle citerne, creusée dans la roche, et batie autour (et) audessus de la pierre en belles murailles de briques crues et c’est ce qui forme l’angle des murailles du côté du SE. C’est la seule chose qu’il y ait dans ces ruines; il y a très peu de maisons et rien à voir aux environs, qu’une grande quantité de tombeaux qui prouvent seulement que cette ville a été bien peuplée autrefois. Elle l’a été par des Chrétiens, car j’y ai vu dans plusieurs endroits des croix sur les pierres”.³¹

³¹ LINANT DE BELLEFONDS, SASOP 4, p. 36.



8. Istabel. Computer montage of three low-altitude aerial photographs. (Phot. B. Żurawski).

Istabel was photographed by a RAF pilot in the 1930s (Fig. 7). The area surrounding the fortress was still relatively depopulated in 1956 (as revealed by the Sudan Survey Department aerial photographs). Re settlement definitely occurred after that date, probably the factor that saved the fortress from the *maroq* diggers. The gate, according to Cailliaud's

description, was in the southern lowest section of the settlement. There is no trace of the cistern hewn in the rock right to the entry gate.

The site of the fortress church, indicated by a capital and a column downslope, has duly been identified. It was erected on the elevated spot, similar to the church in Ed-Deiga, marked by the dense scatter of crushed red-bricks and hard (i.e. exterior) lime-plaster.

The curtain walls were repaired after damage had been inflicted upon the fortress by both enemy and the elements. The oldest sections were built with stones bonded with mud-mortar, whilst later repairs are made mostly of mud-brick.

The Nile is said by the locals to have flowed at the foot of the fortress hill. Local oral testimony at Abkur, states that 200 years ago crocodiles basked in the sun at the foot of Istabel fortress, which is a mile from the riverbank. This local oral tradition is confirmed by Prudhoe's statement:

"The old town of Abcor is seated on a hill and walled, looking like an English castle. Tradition says the Nile once ran at its foot, and the steep but not deep valley of sand in that direction may have given rise to the report. The river is now a mile distant."³²

This tradition is contradicted by the reports that the river flowed in a straight line to the North-West, cutting off what is now Abkur village from the Istabel fortress hill as late as 1914. In fact, the course of the Nile's old bed is marked by a strip of trees and shrubs still visible on the Sudan Survey Department air photograph taken in 1956. This inconsistency of two conflicting testimonies could be easily solved, if we assume that the Nile sometimes enters the old river bed in high flood.

A few kilometres downstream from Istabel, the Nile turns sharply right and continues its northward drift until Selib (= ROM 100),³³ the site of another fortified Christian period settlement. The locals in Selib tell the same story as the inhabitants of Abkur, namely that the Nile passed close by the enclosure and duly turned south afterwards a century or so ago.³⁴

The Christian stronghold of Abkur was visited by the SDRS team several times during the 1997–2000 seasons, and the fortress was measured and photographed from the air in February of 1999. Comparison of the recent aerial photographs with those taken in 1956 by the Sudan Survey Department plane clearly indicates that the modern Abkur village was settled quite recently. The region seems to have been deserted after the fortress was abandoned, due to the blocking of Nile channel by the dunes.³⁵ This is the main reason for

³² A.P. PERCY, (Lord Prudhoe's) *Journal from Cairo to Sennar* (December 11th 1828 to April 1st 1829), typescript copy kept in Griffith Institute, Oxford [= *Journal*], pp. 46–7.

³³ GRZYMSKI, *Reconnaissance*, p. 9.

³⁴ There was a sort of "basin" near Selib within a living memory. People used to say that the river flowed near the Christian enclosure some 100 years ago. Cf. unpublished Mss. kept in Griffith Institute (Oxford University), Envelope No. 1, file (no number, untitled) on "Christian pottery fragments found on 20.03/ 1910 in Soleb (Merkaz Debba) from site of old church inside a frt. (= fortress?) with stone wall 1 metre thick: Nile flowed past this spot less than 100 years ago (...)". Needless to say the Nile nowadays flows c. 1 km from the fortified enclosure at Selib.

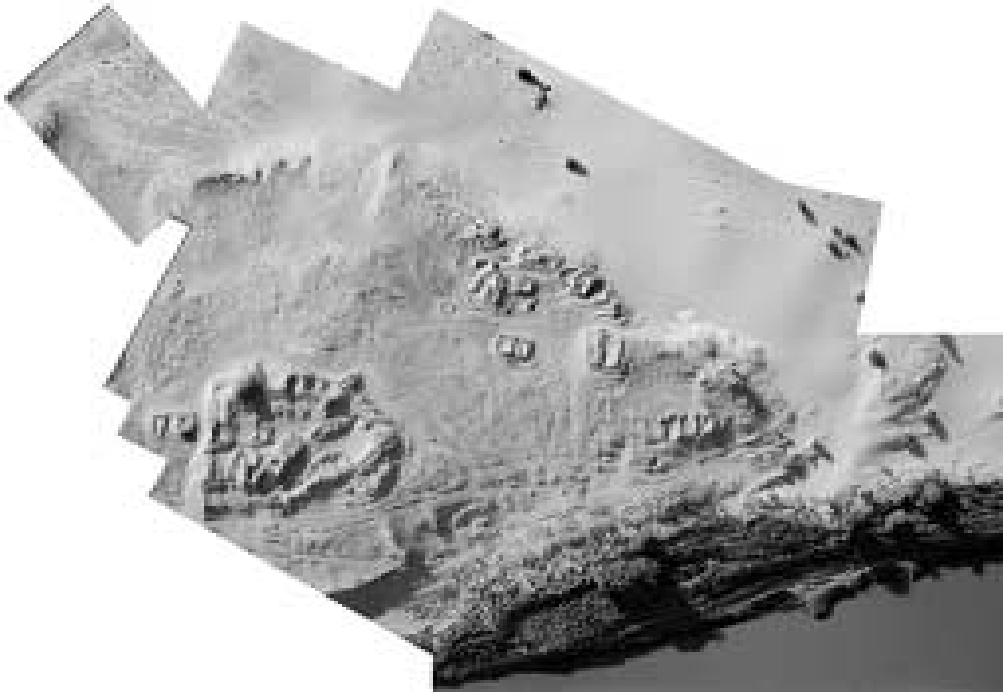
³⁵ It happened after Evliya Çelebi visited the site in 1673 and before Lord Prudhoe witnessed the river being "a mile distant" (from the fortress).

the remarkable state of repair of the Istabel fortress, compared to other Christian strongholds in the region, that nonetheless was slightly affected by anthropogenic factors; no *maroq*-digging was done here.

The region of Abkur had some importance in Kushite times. The Kushite temple found by the SDRS in 1997 was identified with Tergedum mentioned in Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*.³⁶

ED-DIFFAR

Another fortress site that have been surveyed in 1999 was Ed-Diffar. On the basis of the ceramics collected, the fortress seems to have been inhabited first in the Early Christian period, and then again in Terminal Christian and Islamic times. Today it shelters a few modern houses and a vast field of ruins.



9. Ed-Diffar. Fragment of the fortified enclosure with the “Upper Castle”. The granite column and the site of the *extra-muros* church is seen near the right extremity of the enclosure. Computer montage of six low-altitude aerial photographs. (Phot. B. Żurawski).

³⁶ B. ŻURAWSKI, Pliny’s “Tergedum” discovered, *SUDAN & NUBIA* 2, 1998 [= Tergedum], pp. 74–82.

The earliest description of Diffar was sketched in the 17th century by Evliya Çelebi:

“Deffare,

Einer neuen am Ostufer des Nils, mandelförmig aus Ziegeln errichtet und Fest wie Eisen. Im Jahre... führte der König von Funcistan beim Herrscher von Ägypten El-Melik Aybeg, dem Türkmenen, Klage über Bedrückung durch seine Untertanen”.³⁷

F. Cailliaud spent an hour and half exploring its ruins on February the 5th 1820:

“A dix heures et demie, nous étions à Deffâr, village en ruines, situé à cinquante pas du Nil, sur un rocher élevé. Ce village, presque entièrement construit en pierres froides extraites de la montagne, était fortifié; il subsiste encore quelques pans des murs qui l’entouraient, et des restes de petites tours rondes, percées de meurtrières, dont ils étaient flanqués. Je trouvai parmi ces ruines une petite colonne de granit couchée sur le sol; elle a 3 mètres de longueur; son chapiteau non achevé, est orné de la croix grecque. Dans l’intérieur du château, il existe un puits moitié en maçonnerie, qui a 2 mètres sur 4 de largeur, et peut avoir 18 mètres (55 pieds) de profondeur; il me paraît être l’ouvrage des anciens, qui, suivant moi, avaient bâti sur ce rocher avant que les Musulmans vinsent y faire de nouvelles constructions.”³⁸

The drawings done by Linant de Bellefonds in 1821³⁹ and Baron von Müller⁴⁰ (with a sketch plan of the Abkur – Ed-Diffar area) in 1847 reveal the sad truth that the past 150 years have been the most destructive in its millennium and a half as a stronghold. Both drawings, when compared to the present shape of the *kom* at Diffar, reveal a rapid pace of deterioration in most recent times. Today it is a shapeless mound of sand and stones, although a church site with some granite column bases remains *in situ* amongst the eastern, lowermost section of the ruins. A granite column shaft lies nearby and a ferrocrete capital a hundred metres away. Another stone church was reported by Linant de Bellefonds opposite Ed Diffar on Gigernarti Island.⁴¹ However, this church faded out from the memory of the locals, as the search for it in 1999 revealed.

The desolate environs of Diffar are separated from the *mantiqa* of Tergis by the fertile Affad Basin where an attempt at the canalization of basin land was made during the Mahdist period.⁴²

Linant de Bellefonds visited Diffar on 30th September 1821:

“Sur la rive droite du Nil, je fus visiter les ruines d’un petit village dans le genre d’Abcot. Il se trouve à un demi mille de la pointe de l’île sur une élévation et sur le bord du Nil. Je n’y trouvai rien de curieux, mais, hors du village parmi des décombres dans la partie de l’est, je vis près d’un cel arbre de dome une colonne de granit tombée. La pierre n’est pas rose comme le granit d’Assouan, mais extrêmement pale et comme celui des colonnes qui sont dans l’île; elle est aussi de la même forme et du même travail et je crois qu’elles appartenaient toutes au même monument”.⁴³

³⁷ PROKOSCH, Func, p. 162.

³⁸ F. CAILLIAUD, Voyage à Méroé, au Fleuve Blanc et a Fazoql II, Paris 1826 [= Voyage], p. 29.

³⁹ LINANT DE BELLEFONDS, SASOP 4, p. 38, Plate IX.

⁴⁰ J. W. VON MÜLLER, Sitzungsberiche der philosophisch-historischen Classe. Sitzung vom 11. April 1849, *Sitzungsberichte der Kais. Ak. der Wiss* II, 1849, p. 317.

⁴¹ LINANT DE BELLEFONDS, SASOP 4, p. 37.

⁴² EDWARDS, Settlement, p. 95.

⁴³ LINANT DE BELLEFONDS, SASOP 4, p. 38.

Soon after Cailliaud and Linant, the fortress was visited by Ed. de Cadalvène et J. de Breuvéry:

“Deffar nous apparut bientôt avec ses murailles en ruines flanquées de tours et percées de meurtrières. Contre l’usage ordinaire, les murs de cette forteresse, située sur un rocher élevé, sont construits de grosses pierres, ce qui semble indiquer une origine ancienne. Une colonne de granit qui s’élève au milieu de ces ruines, et dont le chapiteau est orné d’une croix, vient confirmer cette opinion; (...)”⁴⁴

Diffar’s dimensions are similar to Helleila, as it stretches out over a 250 m on an elevation along the Nile. The area within the walls consists of a densely overbuilt settlement and the fortified core composed of an Upper Castle and a lower courtyard attached to it on the riverside. The fortress shelters the fertile island of Gigernarti. Its role as guardian of the fertile left bank was much diminished by the presence of a fortress in Hettani 10 km up the river.

ED-DEIGA

There is no doubt that the mighty fortress of Ed-Deiga, situated at the S-W outskirts of El-Araak village, was originally constructed at the riverbank, even though today the river flows a kilometre or so away.⁴⁵ The destruction of the lower part of the fortification [Lepsius called it a “Hof” i.e. (court)yard] was probably caused by riverine’s flooding.

Ed-Deiga guarded the most strategic point in the Southern Dar Dongola. An inaccessible ridge of the volcanic rocks comes closer to the Nile, effectively blocking east-west communication along the river and in the desert immediately to its north, leaving only a narrow pass (Arab.: *ed-deiga*).⁴⁶ Ed-Deiga both marked and controlled the traditional border between Dar Dongola and Dar Shaik’iyia.

On the basis of the ceramics collected, the fortress was constructed well after Christian administration had installed itself in the Southern Dongola Reach. The excellent quality of the construction methodology dates Ed-Deiga even closer to the 6th/7th century. However, reconnoitres in 1998 and 2000 *intra* and *extra muros* have revealed no trace of occupation prior to the Christian period and the ceramic material collected within the walls dates its construction to the 8th–9th century.⁴⁷ The size and outline likens Ed-Deiga to the fortress in El-Kab, situated on the same bank more than 200 km upstream in the Fourth Cataract region.⁴⁸ Ed-Deiga is markedly different from its sister strongholds of Bakhit and Ed-

⁴⁴ ED. DE CADALVÈNE, J. DE BREUVÉRY, *L’Égypte et La Turquie de 1829 à 1836*, Paris 1836 [= *L’Égypte*], p. 244.

⁴⁵ According to the description of the 19th century travellers (Lepsius and Wilkinson) the fortress still stood at that time on the riverbank.

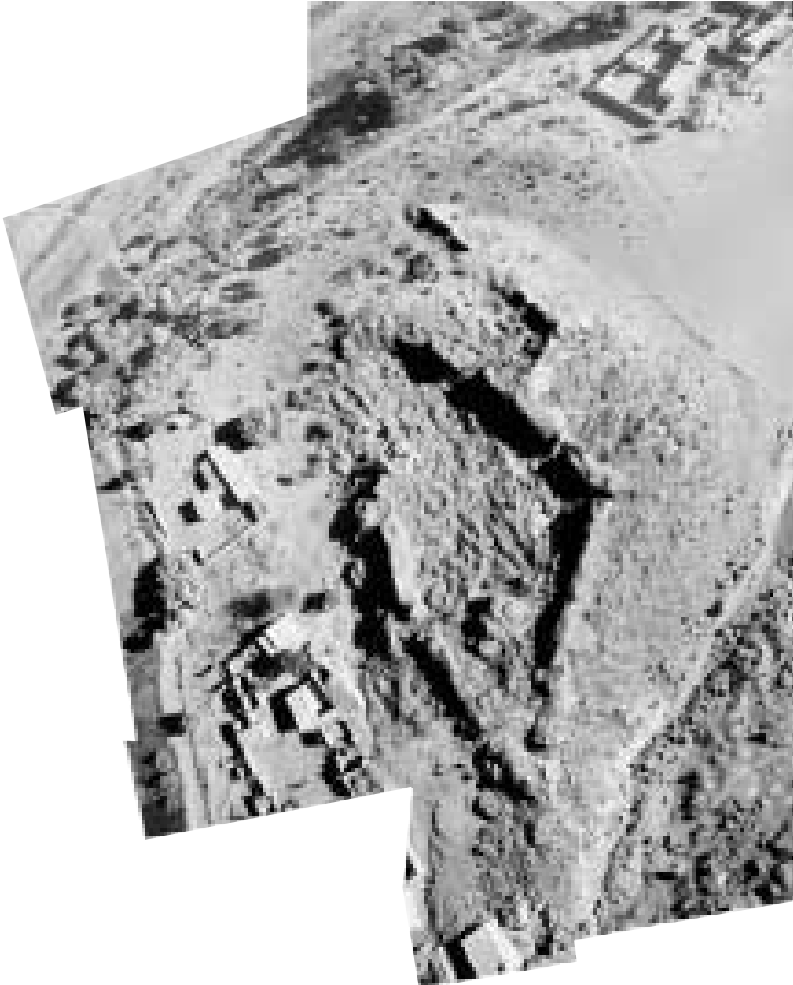
⁴⁶ H.B. NICHOLSON, A fragment from Christian Nubia, *Sudan Notes and Records* XVI, 1933 [= Fragment], p. 85.

⁴⁷ That is a ceramic dating. It is a little bit contradicted by the extremely well execution of the walls that points to the earlier period i.e. 7th(?) cent.

⁴⁸ O.G.S. CRAWFORD, *Castles and Churches in the Middle Nile Region*, *SASOP* 2, Khartoum 1953 [= Castles], pp. 10–16, Fig. 1.

Diffar probably due to its different role. Whilst at Bakhit (called locally Hellaila⁴⁹) and in Ed-Diffar,⁵⁰ numerous settlements were located within the walls, Ed-Deiga apparently housed only a church and military personnel quarters, with the stables probably located in the enclosed (lower) courtyard.

In 1933 H.B. Nicholson stressed Ed-Deiga's resemblance to the (today non-existent) right bank stronghold in Kajabi (near Old Merowe and modern Karima).⁵¹



10. Ed-Deiga. Computer montage of low-altitude aerial photographs. (Phot. B. Żurawski).

⁴⁹ In Arabic: small village, hamlet.

⁵⁰ “Diffar” is simply the Nubian (Kanus and Mahass, cf. Dongolawi “Deffufa” word for “ruins” cf. LINANT DE BELLEFONDS, *SASOP* 4, p. 38 n. 1.

⁵¹ “The stony hills of the desert here come down close to the river and there are the remains of an old fort (?) with broad walls of packed stones similar to, but on a much smaller scale than, those at Kajabi opposite Merowe.”, NICHOLSON, *Fragment*, p. 84.

F. Cailliaud first described Ed-Deiga, when he visited the fortress on February the 5th 1821:

“A une heure et demie, nous atteignîmes Daiga, ancienne limite de la province de Dongolah et de celle de Chaykyé: une grosse muraille en pierres froides, espèce de fortification avancée. Marquait cette limite, qui aujourd’hui a été dépassée jusqu’à Korti. Nous entrions sur le pays qui venait d’être le théâtre de la guerre, et qu’Ismâyl pacha; après deux batailles, avait fait passer sous sa domination. A demi-heure de Daiga, les montagnes s’étendent dans le nord. (...)”⁵²

Linant de Bellefonds who visited the fortress the same year, briefly noted that:

“De plus, à cet endroit, il y a beaucoup de ruines en terre et les restes d’un fort bati en pierres brutes et petites, mais dont les murailles sont tres épaisses.”⁵³

The curtain walls of Ed-Deiga (5 metres thick) are constructed of the ferrogenous sandstone bonded with mud mortar. During Lepsius’s visit to Ed-Deiga in 1844, both layout and construction details of the fortress were perfectly legible, including some structures within the walls and the lower courtyard that had been attached to the fortress at some later period:

“Auf den aus Ufer vorspringenden Sandsteinfelsen steht eine Festung mit dicken, massiven, aus unbehauenen Steinen aufgeführten Mauern von sehr unregelmässiger Form. Um den mittleren Teil des höchsten, auch mit runden und viereckigen Mauertürmen versehenen Hofes lagen noch andere viereckige Hofe herum. In der Mitte der Akropolis auf einem hohen unregelmässigen Felsen standen wieder die ruinen einer kleinen aus Nilerdziegeln gebauten koptischen Kirche, dreischiffig mit Nische, sehr ähnlich der in der Festung Bachit, darunter lagen Fragmente von Sandsteinsäulen und Kapitäl mit Verzierung von spitzen Lotusblättern. Auch hier war der Bau vielleicht erst später in christlicher Zeit zugefügt. Viel rohe Backsteine lagen umher.”⁵⁴

The plan of the upper part of the defensive complex of Ed-Deiga, called the *Akropolis* by Lepsius, is still perfectly discernible on the aerial photograph taken in 1998. However, the pace of modern deterioration is alarming. The mud-brick church, seen within the fortress by Lepsius, Wilkinson, Linant de Bellefonds and even Arkell, has totally disappeared, as have the fragments of granite capitals and columns.

Lepsius could say in 1844 that the spatial division of the church’s interior into three aisles with apse was discernible. His description fits Wilkinson’s 1849 drawing.⁵⁵ Wilkinson skilfully sketched the “Upper Castle” with the church, which was provided with an apse

⁵² CAILLIAUD, *Voyage II*, pp. 34–35.

⁵³ LINANT DE BELLEFONDS, *SASOP* 4, p. 40.

⁵⁴ K.R. LEPSIUS, *Denkmäler aus Ägypten und Äthiopien*, Berlin 1849–58, Leipzig 1913, Text. V [= *Denkmäler*], p. 251.

Lepsius marked Jebel Deiga also in his “Letters”:

“Von hier gelangten wir in einer Stunde nach Gebel Dêga. Starke massive Mauern umschlossen wieder eine christliche Festung, die auf den vorspringenden Sandsteinfelsen lag, und im Innern die Ruinen mehrerer grösserer Gebäude zeigten darunter auch die einer (keinen) dreischiffigen Kirche, der von Bachit sehr ähnlich.” (K.R. LEPSIUS, *Briefe aus Ägypten, Äthiopien und der Halbinsel des Sinai*, Berlin 1852 [= *Briefe*], p. 249).

⁵⁵ J.G. WILKINSON, *Journal 1849* (unpublished manuscript kept at Bodleian Library), Dep. e. 43, Porter & Moss XLII, 35, [= Dep. e. 43], fol. 87 = p. 56a.

niche protruding from the eastern wall of the church and *pastoforia*. It stood on the rock marked with haching. Orientation of the apse perfectly agrees with geographical east.

According to Lepsius, the Ed-Deiga church resembled another in Bakhit fortress, situated only 15 km upstream from Ed-Deiga⁵⁶ A.J. Arkell mentioned the existence of this church, dismantled within the last 50 years, in SNM file 5128:

“Deiga fort 45-F. Sherds, some painted and some incised, collected inside stone walled fort on E. Bank. Where there are traces of a red brick Christian church (...).”⁵⁷

Wilkinson drew the lower courtyard (described “Hof” by Lepsius) as a rectangle, although in fact it was a subrectangular trapezoid joining the thicker and better-built wall of the upper castle at the two easternmost towers. The square towers mentioned by Lepsius were neither seen nor drawn by Wilkinson, nor have they been corroborated by modern research.

Luckily enough, historical descriptions (very coherent with the modern ruins) combined with historical and modern drawings as well as with the air photographs taken in 1964 and 1998, all enable the detailed reconstruction of the fortress’s layout and church. The only missing link is the termination of the wall that continues along the northern wall of the upper castle towards northern direction. This wall apparently was destroyed and partly incorporated into the modern house immediately north of the fortress.

No trace of a gate providing communication to the upper castle or to the lower courtyard in its original layout is seen on Wilkinson’s drawing, or on aerial photographs. Instead, eight posterns of different widths varying from 1 m or so to 4 m are noted, being simple gaps in the outer defences devoid of any flanking pillars or other constructions usually strengthening the gate, which is a most vulnerable part of the defences. Three, located in the western or desertwards wall, were originally provided with doors, as is suggested by the door jambs. Others could be either provided with some sort of doors or simply blocked with palm logs or stones.⁵⁸ Only one opening, giving access from the Upper Castle to the lower courtyard, is significantly wider at more than 4 m. How it was closed, if ever, remains a mystery. One opening in the western wall apparently serving the church, is located against the gate and inside the walls. Only the postern in N-E wall, some 3 m wide, is screened with a hemicycle constructed of the same material as the wall, providing access to the opening along the curtain wall. This was attached to the wall at a later date, and originally the opening was unprotected. The narrowest slot, at about 1 m width, is located in the lower court near its western corner.

Similar posterns are typical of contemporary Byzantine fortifications. They make an unexpected sally of the cavalry units possible from different directions at the same time.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ P. GROSSMANN, Typologische Probleme der nubischen Vierstützenbauten, *Coptic Studies*, (ed W. GODLEWSKI, Warsaw 1990) [= Typologische Probleme], p. 155 (Fig. 3, Hallenkirchen, Bahit).

⁵⁷ On the Wilkinson’s drawing the protruding apsis of this church is still visible.

⁵⁸ Five slots give access to the upper castle, two gave access to the lower courtyard (one is still visible *in situ*, one is on the Wilkinson drawing only).

⁵⁹ M. ABD EL MAKSOU, A. EL-TABA’I, P. GROSSMANN, The Late Roman army castrum at Pelusium (Tall al-Farama), *Cahier de Recherches de l’Institut de Papyrologie et d’Égyptologie de Lille*, 16, 1994 [= Tall al-Farama], pp. 95–103, Figs. 1–2. However, the Byzantine fortress in Pelusium, apart from the sally gates, is provided with three regular gates (*ibidem*, Figs. 4–5).

The Christian strongholds in Makuria were staffed with cavalry units, convincingly evidenced by the thick layers of horse dung seen in the stratifications of Istabel, Helleila and Old Dongola. Nor there is any need to doubt the presence of cavalry unit at Ed-Deiga. However, two “sally gates” connecting the Upper Castle with the lower courtyard look strange in light of the above, since an “unexpected” attack on the enemy that already has overcome the lower defence system seems senseless. More plausibly, the narrow openings play some role as gates in Makurian defences. It is definitely easier to defend five narrow slots that can be permanently blocked in case of emergency, than two gates provided with wooden doors. The more so that the interior of the fortresses seems to be densely packed with houses, without main thoroughfares terminating in wide gates. The streets are winding, in parts adjoining the walls vaulted and blocked at intervals with doors closed at night, resembling the interiors of the Muslim fortified settlements in the Dakhla and Kharga Oases and Christian Lower Nubian strongholds such as Ikhmindī.⁶⁰ The slot gates were probably low enough to dismount any attacker. The posterns probably either were barricaded with palm logs and stones or left virtually open. Last but not least, the numerous openings located along all walls in everyday life made the communications with the outer world much easier.

The area immediately surrounding the fortress was densely populated during the Christian period. Ruins of another church (?) are located close by, towards the desert from the defensive walls.

The stela published by H.B. Nicholson was found nearby.⁶¹ Ruined tombs found during the first (1998) SDRS season, probably are the “ruined graves” mentioned by Nicholson in 1933, as they are located exactly 116 m S-W of the fortress:

“On the hills behind there are the ruins of what appear to have been grain stores, where the husks of the dura are still to be found. At these are a number of large bricks made of the same clay as that on which the inscription is carved.”⁶²

According to the local oral tradition, graves on the hilltops around the fortress contain numerous skeletons.⁶³ Ruined Christian tombs built of redbricks were registered on the *jebel* desertwards of the fortress in 1998 and in 2000.

An important *banija* of Sheikh Ibn Auf, a well-known pilgrimage center attracting pilgrims from all over the Nile Valley, stands atop Gebel Ed-Deiga.⁶⁴ In post-Christian times Ed-Deiga was an important border point between the principality of

⁶⁰ MONNERET DE VILLARD, Nubia I, p. 71, Fig. 59.

⁶¹ NICHOLSON, Fragment, pp. 83–85. The stela in question found in two fragments bearing the Sudan National Museum numbers 9608 and 9609 was formerly kept in the Merowe Museum (Nos. 69 and 70). However, an attempt to locate the two fragments in SNM storeroom done in 1999 by the author, failed.)

⁶² NICHOLSON, Fragment, p. 85.

⁶³ NICHOLSON, Fragment, p. 85.

⁶⁴ On the map of the Sudan (1:250 000), Sheet 45-E, grave of *sheikh* Ibn Auf is marked as: “Sheikh’s tomb on hill, formerly visited by pilgrims from Egypt”.

the *makk* of Dongola and the Shaik'iyia kingdom whose centre was around the Fourth Cataract.⁶⁵

A decisive encounter between the expeditionary corps of Ismail Pasha and the remnants of Shaik'iyia forces under king Shaus, who had lost the battle of Korti a couple of days before, occurred in December 1820 near the fortress of Ed-Deiga. Some of the damages seen in the outer defence system might have been the result from the heavy bombardment of the Egyptian artillery (under the command of George Bethune English).⁶⁶ The fortress was in the field of fire because the Shaus's calvary was sheltered behind its walls. The plausible "sally" of the Shaik'iyia cavalry against Ismail's infantry, apparently effected through the posterns, corroborates to some extent the disputed function of this openings.

Apart from the Greek stela published by H.B. Nicholson already mentioned, some other objects found their way from Ed-Deiga to the Sudan National Museum storeroom. These include:

SNM 5128 (...) Sherds, some painted and some incised. Collected inside stone walled fort on E.Bank, where there are traces of a red brick Christian church.

SNM 5430 (...) 3 sherds.

SNM 5552 (...) 11 flakes, 1 fossil wood, 1 banded agate, 1 chalcedony, 1 vein-quartz

SNM 5892 (...) Two sherds of black ware with a red slip on the outside:

a. rim decorated with incised lines.

b. rim of a crude bowl, decorated with mat or rope impressions.

SNM 9656 (...) Decorated pottery tile (Merowe Museum No. 118).

BAKHIT (HELLEILA)

The upstream periphery of the SDRS concession is guarded by the tremendous fortress site of Helleila, located 10 kilometres south from Ez-Zuma and 15 km north of Ed-Deiga. This imposing complex of mediaeval fortifications is, according to Evliya Çelebi, second only to Qasr Ibrim.⁶⁷ The employment of undressed stones bonded by mud mortar is dominant, as are the rounded, elongated towers.

⁶⁵ LINANT DE BELLEFONDS, *SASOP* 4, p. 40. Cf. LORD PRUDHOE, *Journal*, "(...) At 4 mounted and at half past 5 reached the village of Ed-Deyga, the boundary of Dar Dongola which is separated from Dar Shageea by a low dark looking mountains" (p. 47); cf. also: LEPSIUS, *Briefe*, p. 250.

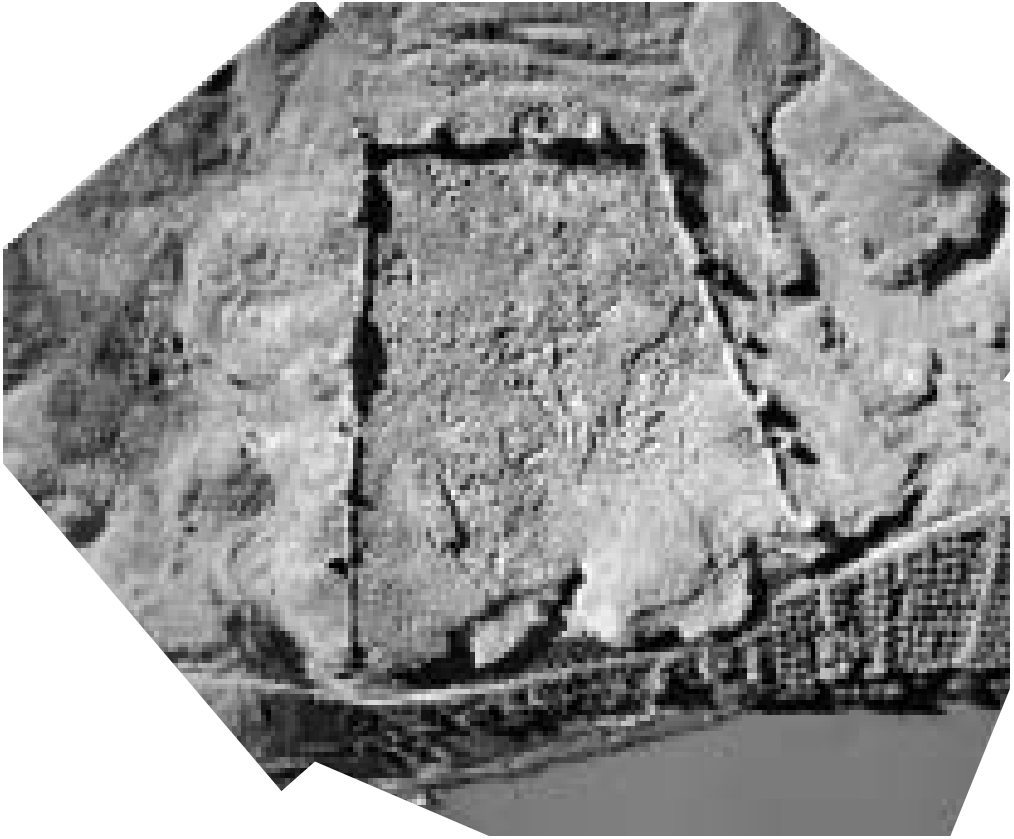
⁶⁶ P.M. HOLT, M.W. DALY, *A history of the Sudan from the Coming of Islam to the Present Day*, London 1989 [= *History*], p. 50. Cf. LORD PRUDHOE, *Journal*: "About sunset came to a crude brick fort, or rather castle, of a Melek, the first against which Ismael Pascha fired his artillery, the effect of which our Arab described as murderous (...)" (p. 48).

⁶⁷ E. Çelebi, after visiting Jebel Barkal (Valley of the Demons), went down to the place he called Kenise, where he noticed, on the western bank of the river strong fortress:

"Nach elfstündigem Ritt in brütender Hitze gelangten wir nach

Kenise,

Einer starken Festung am Westufer des Nils, die dem Wall des Gog gleicht – nach Ibrim der bedeutendsten



11. Bakhit (Helleila). Computer montage of low-altitude aerial photographs. (Phot. B. Żurawski).

The ceramics found on the surface within the girdle walls suggest that Helleila was settled at the very onset of the Christian period and duly abandoned during the Terminal

Festung. Sie wurde von dem Zauberer Azrak erbaut, und zwar nicht aus Stein, sondern zur Gänze aus Ziegeln – ein alter Bau, überaus fest und bewehrt!

Die schucke Feste besitzt zwei Tore, deren eines nach Westen, das andere aber zum Nil geht. Sie hat eine viereckige Gestalt und birgt in Innern an die zweihundert aus Ziegeln erbaute Häuser und eine Nischee. Ausserhalb der Festung stehen an die tausend Häuser aus Ziegeln, Gras und Stroh; sieben Moscheen mit Derwischklauen und vierzig Boza-Schinken". (PROKOSCH, Func, p. 157.)

Since there is no mention in traveller's report of a mighty fortress in Kenisa (four kilometres down the river, on the opposite bank of the Nile) the Çelebi's descriptions must refer to Bakhit.

The fortress in question is done mostly of bricks and definitely is a quadrangle (...ein viereckige Gestalt...) Çelebi apparently refers to the fortress on the eastern bank of the river. From his words appears that the fortress has two gates, one gives on the Nile, another faces the West. It is the situation possible only on the right i.e. eastern bank.

Christian. A few Meroitic potsherds hint at earlier occupation of the site, but the curtain walls certainly are Christian. The fortress was able to shelter the local population from nomadic attack. Its three walls are fairly well preserved; of the fourth wall, running parallel to the Nile, only faint traces remain to prove its former existence. Apparently, more was to be seen in Helleila when O.G.S. Crawford was there in 1950.⁶⁸ Having the river-side virtually unprotected, the fortress apparently was not intended to endure regular siege from a riverine force employing the boats, siege machines etc.

The interior of the fortress has been completely ravaged by *sebbakhin*. The only building to survive is the fortress church. It is a mud brick structure preserved in places up to four metres high. Its eastern passage, the apse curvature and tripartite division of the western part are still visible, with fired vault bricks scattered about. When O.G.S. Crawford visited the site in 1950, the remains of plaster about three-quarters of an inch thick were visible on the inner face of the church walls.⁶⁹ The general layout and the posterns invite comparison with the Late Roman army *castrum* at Pelusium (Tell al-Farama).⁷⁰

Apparently a cavalry unit stationed there to keep the desert marauders at bay. A thick layer of horse manure, also found at Abkur and Old Dongola, probably was the main factor behind the complete ravaging of the fortress interior. Why did the *sebbakh* diggers leave only the church? Was it a Christian cult place long after the collapse of the Christian monarchy in Dongola? More plausibly, the *sebbakhin* knew the *kenisa* was uninhabited, and the meagre layer of natural fertilizer was not worth excavating.

Bakhit did not impress Cailliaud on February the 7th 1820, who mentioned briefly:

“(…) on y distingue, sur quelques rochers élevés. Des restes de murailles de tours rondes et d’habitations, qui furent probablement aussi l’ouvrage des anciens chrétiens”.⁷¹

Almost simultaneously Helleila was visited by Linant de Bellefonds:

“Le soir nous traversames le Nil et vinmes à Careitte, petit village. Je trouvais que c’était les restes des murs d’une ancienne ville et assez grandes; ces murs forment un carré et sont flanqués de tours et de petits bastions de distance en distance. Ils sont solidement batis, étant de briques crues et recouvertes de pierres non taillées mais très bien assemblées. Ces murs sont très épais. Il est étonnant que dans cette enceinte, il n’y ait que les restes d’une seule maison batie en briques crues, mais je suppose, par le grand nombre de pierres qu’il y a dans cette enceinte, que les maisons étaient baties en pierres et qu’elles sont toutes détruites. A la construction des murailles et à l’aspect de ces ruines, que l’on nomment Hillèlé, je crois cette ville très ancienne”.⁷²

Lepsius visited Helleila quarter of a century later. On the 7th of June 1844, he noted:

“Bachit. Grosse Festung am rechten Ufer auf den an den Fluss vorspringenden Felsen mit gewaltiger Umfassungsmauer und Verteidigungstürmen. Im Innern liegen wüste Ruinen und ein Haus das noch ziemlich

⁶⁸ O.G.S. CRAWFORD, *The Fung Kingdom of Sennar*, Gloucester 1951 [= Fung Kingdom], p. 46.

⁶⁹ CRAWFORD, *Fung Kingdom*, p. 47.

⁷⁰ ABD EL MAKSOUND, *Tall al-Farama*, pp. 95–103, Fig. 1.

⁷¹ CAILLIAUD, *Voyage II*, p. 37.

⁷² LINANT DE BELLEFONDS, *SASOP* 4, p. 41.

in seinem Grundrisse erkennbar ist. Das Gebäude war von ungebrannten Ziegeln, einer koptischen Kirche ähnlich eingerichtet, mit Nische und drei Schiffen; doch war dies vielleicht auch die weltliche Einrichtung eines Hauses, hier vielleicht das Kommendanten-Haus. Vielleicht war aber auch die Festung alt, die Kirche nur in christliche Zeit zugefügt".⁷³

Apparently, the heat of the day is responsible for an embarrassing mistake done whilst measuring the fortress. While the spans between the towers and the towers itself were measured down to one centimetre, the length of the fortress extending along the Nile was estimated c. 80 m short (!). The result was a perfect rectangle published in the *Denkmäler*⁷⁴ whereas the fortress is a trapezium, as can be seen on the Fig. 11. This mistake was perpetuated by O.G. S. Crawford, who otherwise gave a valuable description of the fortress as seen in 1950.⁷⁵

The influence of Byzantine military architecture as exemplified at Tell el-Farama (Pelusium) is obvious at Bakhit, and its planning is similar to the destroyed fortress on Tankasi Es-Suq drawn by John Gardiner Wilkinson.

The robbed rock tombs north of the fortress produce scattered human bones and parts of sepulchral crosses of the same type.⁷⁶

Breasted visited Helleila on the 22nd of December 1905:

"Reaching Bakhit on the same day, we found there our first Christian church. It is one of a number still surviving in ruinous condition in the Dongola Province (...) The church of Bakhit is surrounded by heavy fortress walls of sun-dried bricks reinforced with stone. The curtain wall is strengthened by eighteen projecting towers for enfiling the attacking lines".⁷⁷

The huge Christian cemetery of Helleila, built of huge well-baked bricks and located on hills overlooking the fortress, was totally dismantled in 1988. Soon after the catastrophic flood of that year, the locals turned to antiquities for badly needed building material to reconstruct their homes.

The best description of the fortress is of quite modern date. O.G.S Crawford measured and described Helleila in 1950, however with some mistakes and simplifications:

"The fortress is a rectangle whose longer axis runs at right-angles to the river. Three of the walls are fairly well preserved, but the fourth (SE), running parallel to the river, has left only just enough remains here and

⁷³ LEPSIUS, *Denkmäler*, pp. 252–253; Lepsius described his visit to Bakhit also in his letters:

"Zwei und eine halbe Stunde von Zuma. Liegt zuerst Bakhit. Hier springt die Felswand der Wüste bis an den Fluss heran und trägt eine, ohne Zweifel gleichfalls aus christlicher Zeit stammende Festung mit achtzehn halbrund vorspringenden Verteidigungsthürmen. Im Innern waren unter wüsten Schutthäusern noch die Ruinen einer Kirche, welche damals überall den Mittelpunkt der festen Orte gebildet zu haben scheint. Hier war sie nur 63 Fuss lang und das ganze Schiff ruhte auf vier Säulen und zwei Wandfeilern; dennoch entsprach die Anlage vollkommen dem allgemeinen Typus." LEPSIUS, *Briefe*, p. 249.

⁷⁴ LEPSIUS, *Denkmäler*, p. 252 (Fol. IV, 4 194° 195).

⁷⁵ CRAWFORD, *Fung Kingdom*, pp. 46–47.

⁷⁶ Identical cross has been found in Hambukol. Also the terracotta crosses known from a cemetery north of Kom H (i.e. Monastery of the Holy Trinity) were inscribed with *fos zoe* text. Such crosses were still visible on graves by the 19th cent. travellers on the left bank in El-Baja and in Gabriya/Ambukol (MAZUEL, *L'Oeuvre*, p. 47).

⁷⁷ BREASTED, *Report*, p. 39.

there to prove its former existence. A fragment near the east end still stands three feet high, of rough stone. The main walls consisted of a core of unburnt mud brick enclosed between walls of rough stone, the inner 9 feet thick and still standing to a height of about 15 feet on the inside and 35 feet on the outside. The SW wall consists of a core of burnt red brick between walls of rough stone, the outer one four feet thick. The NW wall, running across the land side, is about 420 feet long and has three towers between and excluding those at each corner. They are the following distances apart, measured from N to S between their nearest walls: 72, 72, 87, 117 feet. The outer walls are of rough stone and the inner of mud brick. The tower walls depart from the main wall at right angles, but not enough is preserved to show whether they were truly semi-circular or oblong, probably the latter.

Within the walls are the remains of a building of mud brick, about 40 yards from the SW wall. It is divided into two parts by a cross wall, also of mud brick, and in the larger (NE) room is a shapeless heap of red brick. The building is founded on rock, exposed in a small gully on the SE side. This is presumably Lepsius's church, but the columns are not now to be seen. The mud bricks are much bigger than the modern ones and seemed to be about the same size as the baked bricks of other Christian sites; one of them had a long finger-mark drawn obliquely across it like those of Soba and Old Sennar. On the inner face of the "church" wall are the remains of plaster about three-quarters of an inch thick.

The whole of the interior of the fort is covered with small (marug?) pits and the debris of stone buildings; but no shaped stone was found. Christian potsherds are thickly strewn over the ground, some painted, some of a fine red ware like samian but not red all through. There were no birma-fragments and nothing at all like the Fung ware of the Blue Nile, nor was there anything that looked at all like Meroitic or earlier ware.

The castle is placed, between two small khors, the deeper one on the SW; and a small khor runs into it from the river on the SE side. On the NW, or land side, the defences have been strengthened by two trenches dug between the lateral khors, and resting on them just like some British cross-dykes. The outer trench is the deepest and its vertical height is not less than 12 feet, the material excavated has been thrown up as strong bank on the inner side, but there are no traces of any built wall. Outside the NE wall of the fortress is an open oblong grave cut in the rock and empty, and there are strong hints of other unopened graves all round it.

I made enquiries about the name, and was told that it was called Hilleila, but the old man who gave this information was not, apparently, quite sure of it, nor did he inspire confidence for other reasons. The name Hillélé appears, however, on Linant's map just here. The hill is called Jebel Bakhit and it will be best to call the fortress after it".⁷⁸

The likeness of Helleila to the stronghold seen and drawn by Wilkinson in Tanqasi is stunning. The same trapezoidal outline of the curtain wall spaced with elongated hemicycles of the towers suggest the same construction date and the same original that seems to be the Byzantine model fortress in Pelusium.

Helleila takes a natural defensive position on the verge of a rocky *gebel* approaching the bank of the Nile at this spot. The fortifications are secured by two *khors* from S-W and S-E. The most vulnerable N-W wall is safeguarded by two dry moats, the outer one being 4 m deep.⁷⁹

The fortress embraces on the north the fertile stretch of cultivable land on both banks of the Nile, the fertile Masawi Island included. It was a region of paramount importance from Napatan times; a desert shortcut to Kawa and Letti branches off from the Nile Valley over there. The huge temple found in 2000 by the SDRS team at Hugeir Gubli, exactly

⁷⁸ CRAWFORD, Fung Kingdom, pp. 46–47.

⁷⁹ *op. cit.*, p. 46.

mid-way between Bakhit and Deiga as well as the Kushite temple in Usli on the left bank, stresses its importance as administrative and religious centre in the Kushite period.

The fortress' curtain walls seen on Lepsius' drawing are significantly longer. They continue riverwards beyond the easternmost towers, a situation quite different from contemporary evidence.

The would-be gates – the archaeological evidence is inconclusive due to the lamentable state of repair – probably were located in the middle of the W-S wall and in the second (from the river) bastion in the northern wall. Their mode of construction, if present reconstruction is sound, resembles the gate at Ed-Deiga. A gate should be located at the western termination of the northern wall, on the basis of analogy with the twin fortress at Tanqasi Es-Suk. In fact, the fortress has a good approach from that side, via a pathway coming from the *gebel* and a road up the Nile along the river that gives on this “gate”.

Curiously enough, most of the towers attached to the curtain wall that originally had been strengthened only by at least six towers. The towers incorporated into the original walls have a peculiar shape of elongated hemicycle. The southern wall, protected by a *chor*, originally have no towers at all.

The towers, regardless their outer outline, are of two general types:

- 1) tower with empty space inside, entered from the fortress's interior through a gap in the wall;
- 2) solid tower built *pari passu* with the girdle wall or added later.

The original towers and the first additions were invariably of the latter type.

The thickness of the Helleila's girdle wall varies from 3 m at the thinnest section of the southern wall,⁸⁰ to 5 m in the western wall.

Helleila was a curiously planned fortress and almost defenceless, with nine openings in the outer walls and riverward side unprotected, or at least extremely vulnerable to both an unexpected nomadic attack and assault from the “riverine” enemy.

Such disrespect for nomadic and riverine threat, coded in the planning and execution of the main fortress in the region, causes us to reconsider the safety problem in Southern Dongola Reach throughout the Christian period. So many posterns (“sally gates”) in the curtain walls also are encountered in two neighbouring fortresses that share some common characteristics. However both are sheltered from the desert by an inaccessible rocky *gebel*. The Cataracts guarded them from the outside riverine threat. The long stretch of the Nile, making the sail northward virtually impossible protected them from an attack from the south. These could be the reasons behind the “openness” of Helleila and Ed-Deiga.

Initial study of the Bakhit ceramics and architecture enables some conclusions. Firstly, the threat from Egypt diminished after the conclusion of *baqt*. Egyptian forces, traditionally equipped with boats were no longer considered a threat. All the more so in such places as Bakhit and Ed-Deiga. The *baqt*, apart from its economical flavour, was a pact of non-

⁸⁰ This section was abuted with an attached tower.

agresion. The unsheltered riverine side of Helleila is an architectural response to the “Pax Nubiana” that gave impetus to Nubian economic and political blossoming in 7th–12th cent.

The fortress was heavily demolished at least once, as its walls were considerably pulled down. Subsequently, the walls were strengthened with new towers that were structurally only bonded on their upper portions; the lower sections merely abut against the wall without bonding.

EZ-ZUMA

At Ez-Zuma, ten kilometres upstream from Helleila is another Christian fortress of similar dimensions. This stronghold is known from Lepsius’s description only. Its construction resembled in some respects the formidable fortifications of Old Dongola, the most apparent similarity are the mammoth stones used to line the mud brick cores of the lower sections of the curtain walls and bastions. Lepsius was there in 1844:

“Zuma. Ummauerung einer alten Festung mit ausgebauten Verteidigungstürmen. Die Vordermauer nach dem Flusse zu ist erst in letzter Zeit von den benachbarten Einwohnern zerstört und abgetragen worden, die Hintermauer und die nördliche waren noch am besten erhalten und bestanden aus einem Kerne von ungebrannten Ziegeln auf einem Unterbau von Steinschutt, dieser Kern war aber bekleidet mit grossen rohen Steinblöcken, die zum Teil ganz kolossal waren. Die Seiten der Festung hatten ca. 200 Schritt Länge”.⁸¹

Construction details, such as the wall substructure made of huge unworked stones, are strongly suggestive for an Early Christian origin for the entire complex.⁸² Huge post-Meroitic tumuli located west of the settlement are strongly suggestive of an even earlier dating.⁸³

Zuma probably was important center of power in the Transitional Period between the post-Meroitic and Christianity. Below the huge mounds, the largest in the Middle Nile Valley, the early Makurian monarchs could have been buried.⁸⁴

The character of Ez-Zuma as a royal seat, stressed by the presence of a tumulus field of definitively “royal” character⁸⁵ is perpetuated in oral tradition, as recorded by Lepsius.

⁸¹ LEPSIUS, *Denkmäler*, p. 253.

⁸² The etymology of the toponym could have something in common with Greek word *ōi éwéá* that denotes “that which is girded, the most fitting name for the town “girded” with walls.

⁸³ The survey accomplished in Ez-Zuma in February 2000 brought to light a scatter of Early to Classic Christian ceramics that is also present among the tumuli.

⁸⁴ The tumuli field in Ez-Zuma presents all the characteristics of a royal burial ground. As compared to other tumuli fields of the same period it comprises a limited number (30) of tumuli, some of mammoth dimensions. A superb scimitar of gilded bronze found by the locals among the tumuli in March 2000 stresses such attribution.

⁸⁵ Ez-Zuma tumuli field, in contradiction to other Makurian post-Meroitic graveyards, contains only 30 tumuli (as compared to 200 tumuli in Abkur), 8 of them being of huge dimensions. The rest cluster around those biggest ones reflecting the social status and kinship of the post-Meroitic society. The heaps of white limestone and mudbricks recorded on the west side of the biggest tumuli might be the remains of the auxiliary structures styled on the funerary chapels seen on the older Kushite royal graveyards in El-Kurru and Gebel Barkal (both within walking distance from Ez-Zuma).

The description of Ez-Zuma in his *Briefe* mentions that the fortress was called Karat Negil after the name of “an old king of the land”:

“Dreiviertel Stunden weiter stromab liegt am rechten Ufer das Dorf Zuma. In seiner Nähe nach den Bergen hin erhebt sich eine alte Festung mit Vertheidigungsthürmen, Karat Negil genannt, deren Vordermauern erst vor 50 bis 60 Jahren zerstört und abgetragen wurden, als sich die Bewohner von Zuma hier niederliessen. Der Name wird von einem alten Könige des Landes, Negil abgeleitet, zu dessen Zeit das umliegende jetzt trockne Land noch vom Nile erreicht und fruchtbar gewesen sein soll.

Das erste, was mir auf dem Wege nach der Festung in die Augen fiel, war wieder eine Anzahl Pyramiden, von denen acht jetzt an 20 Fuss hoch sind; die zerstörte, welche in der Regel die massivsten gewesen zu sein scheinen. migerechnet, fanden wir über 30, südwestlich sind noch die alten Steinbrüche zu sehen, welche das Material zu den Pyramiden lieferten”.⁸⁶

The dating and identity of the “quarry” at Ez-Zuma, where the so-called “Anachorite Grotto” was installed in Christian period, remains a mystery. The Zuma tumuli, despite the exaggerated term “pyramids” used by Lepsius and others to describe them, are constructed of earth and gravel with some unworked stones employed in the cores. The fortress, according to Lepsius’ description and all known analogies, was constructed of mud bricks and unworked ferrogenous sandstone. The known Kushite religious and sepulchral centres, the most plausible recipient of quarried blocks, are too far away. The Zuma quarry, if any, could have been used to obtain building material for local early Christian churches that should have been constructed in the densely populated and strategically, as well as economically, important region of Ez Zuma.⁸⁷

KAJABI

Kajabi fortress sits on the right bank of the river less than 15 kilometres upstream from Ez-Zuma but below the Old Merwe. The fortress, beyond SDRS concession limits, was mentioned by Monneret de Villard (... *ha molte delle caratteristiche di una costruzione di epoca cristiana...*).⁸⁸ It was also marked as a fortress on the map drawn by Eduard Rüppell in 1825.⁸⁹

According to Nicholson, the Kajabi fortress was “similar in shape and execution to Ed-Deiga, but definitely larger in scale”.⁹⁰

On Sheet 45-F map of the Sudan, the site of Kajabi fort (unnamed) is marked as a “Roman Fort”.⁹¹

⁸⁶ LEPSIUS, *Briefe*, p. 248.

⁸⁷ There are no typical quarrying marks in would-be quarries in Ez-Zuma. The so called anachorete grotto was to all purpose rather a chapel hewn in the rock face that a void left after quarrying blocks.

⁸⁸ MONNERET DE VILLARD, *Nubia I*, p. 253.

⁸⁹ RÜPPELL, *Reisen in Nubien*, Pl. 10: Karte des Nilstroms zwischen Wadi-Halfa und Barkal nach sechsfacher eigener Marschrouten.

⁹⁰ NICHOLSON, *Fragment*, p. 84.

⁹¹ Cf. SAD. 845/8/36.

CONCLUSIONS

Some preliminary conclusions can be drawn from initial study of the Christian defence system in the Southern Dongola Reach. The foremost, and self-evident conclusion is that the emergence of the Christian Kingdom of Dongola and its formative years were turbulent periods shadowed by a constant intimidation from the nomads. However, the threat exerted by Nubian Desert nomads seems to have been the greater.

By the 12th century, nomadic threat is felt everywhere in the Kingdom of Makuria. Buildings in public use, such as the presumed *xenon* at Hambukol, were fortified by that time.⁹²

The traffic on the Nile was controlled in the navigable Dongola Reach during the entire Christian period. Command of the river was the basis for the defensive system as a whole. An interesting site guards a granite ridge crossing the river half way between Ed-Debba and Old Dongola (N. 18° 06' 92", E. 30° 55' 64"). This small fortified site with well-preserved walls was settled in the Early Christian Period and abandoned before characteristic Late Christian wares appeared, according to the ceramics collected there.

All strongholds in Southern Dongola Reach reveal many affinities in both their original layout and construction features, including the overall employment of undressed stones (except Sinada!) bonded by mud mortar, and the presence of rounded, elongated towers.

Intervals between the strongholds depend on the population quota and economic importance of the region. A denser defence pattern is recorded in populous Dar Shaik'iyia, where Ed-Deiga is some 15 km distant from Bakhit, Bakhit 10 km from Ez-Zuma, and Ez-Zuma 14 km from Kajabi; the distance between the left bank Tanqasi Es-Sug and Ez-Zuma is 9 km, and Tanqasi to Kajabi is 6 km. The less populated regions both down- and upstream of Argi, where the dunes effectively have negated agriculture, have a more than 40 km distance between the bigger strongholds on the right bank (Istabel to Old Dongola).⁹³ The subsidiary fortified enclosures of Selib and Sinada are located within this enormous gap in the defensive system.

The right bank and left bank strongholds complement each other. They are built in such a manner that the distance between two fortresses, regardless of the riverbank on which they are located, is not less than 10 km. Each stronghold evidently sheltered the local population living on both banks of the Nile and on the islands.

The Makurian defence as a whole was based on mastery of cavalry tactic, the legendary skills of Nubian archers⁹⁴ and, first of all, on the good command of the river. The

⁹² The report on the excavations on this important medieval site (by B. ŻURAWSKI) is currently with printers. On the identification of the Building A in Hambukol with *xenon* cf.: B. ŻURAWSKI, Faith Healing, Philanthropy and Commemoration in Late Christian Dongola, *Ägypten und Nubien in spätantiker und christlicher Zeit, Sprachen und Kulturen des Christlichen Orients*, 6.1, pp. 423–448.

⁹³ This gap is filled by fortified enclosures at Baganarti and Selib and left bank fortress of Gabrija.

⁹⁴ The stone archers' thumb rings were found, within the walls, at Sinada and Ed-Diffar. Especially the complete sandstone ring unearthed at Sinada (SDRS.01/1) deserves attention.

kings of Dongola would have a commercial fleet and a navy that kept the river under control. The stelae of Nobadian ναύαρχοι: Iesusinkouda, Staurophoros (and to some extent Kudanbes)⁹⁵ commemorate the commanders of the Middle Nile fleet. The peculiar conditions occurring in Southern Dongola Reach suggest this fleet would have included rowing boats.

It was a tremendous effort and a huge burden to the crown to commission and maintain of a dozen or so strongholds in only a small portion of the Kingdom of Dongola. This was the price to pay for ruling a country which chiefly bordered the (mostly Muslim) nomadic tribes.

The mightiest fortifications are at either end of the Southern Dongola Reach. Similarities are manifold between Old Dongola on the one hand, and of Ed-Deiga, Bakhit and Ez-Zuma on the other. This is no coincidence, since they guard regions of similar economical importance and dense habitation. The region centred at Dongola, including the Letti Basin, the islands of Tangasi, Hammur and Ghaddar, as well as the fertile west bank opposite the capital, was the economical backbone of the Kingdom of Dongola. The centres of power in the Transitional and post-Meroitic times probably were the southern Letti Basin and the fertile region of Baganarti and Tanqasi, where post-Meroitic tumuli fields have been reported.

Ed-Deiga, Bakhit and Ez-Zuma guarded a very populous and fertile district. Together with the fortress of Kajabi and Tanqasi, on the opposite side of the river, it sheltered the core of a principality that earlier was the core of the Kushite Empire and later, in post-Christian times, was known as the Kingdom of Merawe. In pre-Christian times, the region was independent. There are good grounds to believe that it took an upper hand in Makuria, exerting its supremacy far down the river. The region could be governed by an *eparch* or a subordinate kinglet (one of 13 priest-kings mentioned by Abu Salih the Armenian⁹⁶) in Christian times. The border between both principalities was at Ed-Deiga, with the last definitely belonging to the principality upriver.

In terms of architecture, all the strongholds upriver from Ed-Deiga have some common traits, the twin fortresses of Bakhit and Tankasi being the leading examples. Their planning reveal different attitude towards the problem of gates. As a rule, the lands upriver from Ed-Deiga were more strongly defended and better guarded than those downriver.

One general remark emerges from all the above. The region between the Ed-Deiga and the Fourth Cataract retained its distinct character and individual features throughout the Christian period. The homeland of the Kushite state and dynasty merged with the Kingdom of Makuria, but emerged as a separate principality after the collapse of the Christian Kingdom. It is strongly suggestive that, even throughout the Christian Period, the region entertained a kind of autonomous yet subordinate status within the Kingdom of Makuria.

⁹⁵ A. ŁAJTAR, The Epitaph of Iesusinkouda: Eparch of Nobadia(?), Domestikos of Faras and Nauarchos of the Nobadae, died A.D. 1102, *Gdańsk Archaeological Museum African Reports* I, 1998, p. 78.

⁹⁶ G.VANTINI, *Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia*, Heidelberg and Warsaw 1975, p. 333.