The Southern Border of the Kingdom of Makuria in the Nile Valley
Written sources do not contain much information about the borders between the different kingdoms of medieval Nubia. It seems that there were two types of borders\(^1\) and the difference between them comes down to a matter of precision. The borders running through the Nile Valley are in the majority of cases more clearly defined than the borders which run through the desert. In the first instance the names of settlements, characteristic points in the landscape, are given as well as distances in terms of the number of days a journey takes. Desert borders however are often described using only the names of the tribes which were meant to be, at least seasonally, in the given region, without any further details. On the basis of this observation it is possible to deduce that in the time of the Kingdom of Makuria the borders in the Nile Valley were precisely established.

In this article I will deal with the southern border of the Kingdom of Makuria in the Nile Valley. The issue in question is whether, in a certain period (at least within the Thirteenth–Fourteenth centuries), could this border have crossed through the fortifications in Wadi Dam et Tor and Tarfaya (Fig. 1). The conclusions are based on the analysis of written sources and the context of both the aforementioned sites.

**Written sources mentioning the southern border of the Kingdom of Makuria in the Nile Valley**

We have few detailed mentions of the southern border of the Kingdom of Makuria. All of them, except one, describe Al-Abwab as the border between Makuria and Alodia.

The frontier is first mentioned in the accounts of John of Ephesus who writes about the journey of Longinus to Alodia which took place around the year 580. The name Al-Abwab does not appear here. It was possible to reach Alodia from Nobadia via the desert. According to the author, the Alodian border began in the Nile Valley, but the text does not define exactly where.\(^2\) D. Welsby believes that Longinus followed the road from Korosko, which ends in an unspecified point in the region of Abu Hamed.\(^3\)

The first mention relating to Al-Abwab dates back to the second half of the Ninth century. Al-Ya’qubi writes that in order to reach Alwa from al-Allaqi it was necessary to cross Kuban and the place called Al-Abwab.\(^4\) Al-Abwab appears in written sources more frequently in later periods of the Kingdom of Makuria and is described as:

– a village on the eastern bank of the Nile,

\(^{1}\) G. VANTINI, Oriental Sources Concerning Nubia, Heidelberg and Warsaw 1975 [Oriental Sources, pessim].

\(^{2}\) Ibid., pp. 13–23.

\(^{3}\) D.A. WELSBY, The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia Pagans, Christians and Muslim along the Middle Nile, London 2002 [Medieval Kingdoms], p. 34.


\(^{5}\) Ibid. p. 609.
1. Contour map of Upper Nubia with names mentioned in text marked.
– a district under the control of Alodia which had its own ruler,
– the northern province of Alodia,
– an independent kingdom (It is sometimes thought that it could be simply another term for ‘the Kingdom of Alodia’.  

Al-Abwab is one of a few names which appear in written sources dealing with the second half of the Thirteenth century. Other settlements or kingdoms likewise difficult to locate are Bara, At-Taka (modern Kassala?), Kaduru, Danfu, Ara, Bifal, Anaj, Karsa. The location of Al-Abwab is approximately described in written sources. It was to be found in the region of the Atbara river and the Fifth Cataract of the Nile. The description of the route contained in the narrative of the King Semamun’s escape from Dongola to the Al-Abwab border is particularly valuable. This took place in 1289–1290. The King evacuated his people from the area south of the Mika’ila island. When the Sultan’s army arrived in Dongola they found the town deserted. Only an old man and old woman remained, who informed the Muslims that the King had gone in the direction of the island further up the Nile, fifteen days journey from Dongola. On the way to this island the boats accompanying the Mamluk army met with difficulties sailing due to the many rocks cropping up from the river bed. The King, on learning that the Sultan’s army had reached the island and was waiting to attack until the delayed boats arrived, escaped upriver leaving his people behind on the island. It was to take a further three days journey from the island to the Al-Abwab border, which was no longer under the power of the escaping King.

Al-Abwab is most often mentioned in written sources in relation to the story of the King’s escape from Dongola before the Mamluk army. Al-Abwab was a sanctuary for refugees from Makuria. However, we know of situations when refugees arriving there were then deported to Cairo.

Al-Abwab disappears from written sources in the second half of the Fourteenth century. It is difficult to say what exactly happened, but J.W. Crawfoot supplies interesting information that at the beginning of Twentieth century the tradition of Al-Abwab was still present. 

Some ideas of the southern border of the Kingdom of Makuria in the Nile Valley

Studies of this problem are difficult to present. Most scholars mention this issue briefly, giving only selected information. According to the majority of researchers the border should be located somewhere between the Fourth Cataract of the Nile and the region of Shendi.
In the analysis of this issue they took into account written sources, the occurrence
of characteristic pottery and the location of the fortified sites.

Some researchers reconstruct the exact line of the border. H. Jackson indicates El-
Kurru (now El-Koro) as the boundary zone. According to him this is the border between
the regions where either Makurian or Alodian pottery can be found.

A.J. Arkell narrows this region down to the area between Karima and Abu Hamed
describing it as the territory of Al-Abwab. The phrase Al-Abwab he translated as ‘Cata-
racts’. J.W. Crawfood translated this phrase as ‘Gates’ and places Al-Abwab in the Shendi
region. L.P. Kirwan, following J.W. Crowfoot and H.A. MacMichael likewise locates
Al-Abwab in the same position. Crowfoot also states that at the beginning of the Twenti-
eighth century the name Al-Abwab was sometimes used to describe the district of Kabushia
not far from Meroe.

In the 1970s, W.Y. Adams was of the belief that there was a buffer zone between
Makuria and Alodia in the area between the Fourth and Fifth Cataracts. This was supposed
to be a sparsely inhabited region. According to Adams this was where al-Umari, for a num-

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15 Id., An Egyptian invasion of the Sudan in 591 B.C., Kush 3, 1955, p. 94.
16 O.G.S. Crawford, Fung Kingdom of Sennar, Gloucester 1951, p. 24; Id., Field Archaeology of the Mid-
dle Nile Region, Kush 1, 1953, p. 24, fig 2.
18 J.W. Crowfoot, Lacunae, p. 6; H.A. MacMichael, History of the Arabs in the Sudan I, London 1922,
p. 183.
ber of years, created his state. Al-Abwab then was the most northern district of Alwa or possibly an independent kingdom created as a result of the earlier fall from power of the Soba kings.

D. Edwards and Y.M. El Amin observe a statistical increase in the occurrence of Dongolan pottery compared to Alodian wares in the region of the Fifth Cataract, and as a result Edwards places Al-Abwab near Atbara.

D. Welsby presents several suggestions. According to him the chain of fortresses stretching between Jebel Umm Marrahi and Jebel Nakhara, and even further to Kurgus, could be proof that this region was under the control of one political organism. He also points to the Soba Ware fragment which was found in Jebel Nakhara.

**Wadi Dam Et-Tor and Tarfaya, in context**

As part of the *Fortresses of Sudan: following O.G.S. Crawford* project the archaeological investigation included, amongst others, two fortified sites – Wadi Dam Et-Tor and Tarfaya (Fig. 2). Crawford had earlier described both sites. He concentrated, however, on the fortification in Tarfaya and the cemetery in Wadi Dam Et-Tor.

For the aims of this particular paper the location of both of these sites seems to be the key. They are to be found on opposite banks of the Nile, at the same level, where all the branches of the river meet for a short distance in one channel. (Fig. 3).

**Tarfaya**

The fortified site in Tarfaya was mentioned for the first time by H. Jackson. O.G.S. Crawford left a very exact description together with a plan, after which the site began to appear in scientific publications.

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20 Ibid., p. 537.
26 Jackson, Trek, p. 31.
27 Crawford, Castles, pp. 15–17.
The site was already in a very poor condition during Crawford’s time. But comparing the plan made in the 1950s with the current state, further losses can be observed (Fig. 4) and are most obvious in the traces of the buildings inside the fortification.

The fortification in Tarfaya is worth attention. There is a clear difference between the exterior and interior walls. The exterior wall is marked in a very regular way (Fig. 5). Only two semi-circular constructions emerge from the exterior line of the eastern wall. Apart from this there are no visible traces of any towers. As for the interior wall it is the towers that mark its regularity. The construction of walls connecting towers makes it irregular (Fig. 6). This is particularly visible when the width and course are compared. This could be an indicator of numerous reconstructions of the interior wall. It could also indicate that the exterior and interior sections were built by different workers, so a time difference between both constructions could exist. The remains visible on the surface however give no clues to this nor any further questions on this issue.

Close to Tarfaya there is an extensive multi-cultural site on a rock plateau about 200m north-east of the fortification (Fig. 2). Fragments of Neolithic pottery, numerous tumuli and, as probably mentioned by Crawford, an area covered with fragments of fired brick still with the remnants of white plaster. This is thought to be a Christian cemetery where, according to Crawford, it is also possible to find fragments of inscriptions similar to those in Wadi Dam Et-Tor on the other bank of the river.
4. Tarfaya, site plan (Drawn by M. Drzewiecki).
5. Tarfaya, outer wall (Phot. Ł. Banaszak).

6. Tarfaya, outer face of inner wall (Phot. Ł. Banaszak).
**Wadi Dam Et-Tor**

Wadi Dam Et-Tor is a site known earlier only from one short mention by O.G.S. Crawford, later also by D.N. Edwards. It is very poorly preserved. However, thanks to the analysis of satellite images it was possible to explain several questions concerning the constructions visible here on the surface (Fig. 7).

We are dealing with a settlement surrounded by walls. The northern part of the site was destroyed by the meandering waters of the Nile (Fig. 2). The central section of the site is heavily covered in fragments of fired bricks and pottery (Fig. 8). We have been able to identify two constructions: one rectangular and one cruciform. They are in very poor condition, only faintly visible on the ground surface. We have not been able to record any of the wall faces. Their remains reach up to about 0.5m above the surface. It seems that initially they were surrounded by a mud brick curtain wall. Currently, only remnants of its western, southern and eastern parts have survived in the form of elongated ramparts up to 1 m high.

About 20m away the remnants of another surrounding wall have been recorded. It was built of stone, sand and fragments of fired bricks. Larger stones created two faces of the wall and the core consisted of smaller stones, sand and fragments of fired bricks. We did not notice any signs of mortar being used, but the remains are much eroded (Fig. 9). In the area between the curtain walls there are also fragments of fired bricks, and stones of irregular shape and different sizes visible. There also are pottery sherds scattered on the surface, including fragments painted in the characteristic manner of the Christian period.

Moving away from the centre of the site there is a rock outcrop in a form of a long vein (Fig. 7). This formation surrounds the constructions mentioned earlier from the south side and comes to an end not far from the river bank, east of the curtain walls. It cuts through the *wadi* which limits the site from the west. On the surface of the outcrop fragments of fired brick have been recorded. In two places they form an almost circular shape. Nowhere else do they form any recognisable shape. Crawford suggested that the two circular forms are graves, but it is possible that they had a different function. Perhaps here we are dealing with another belt of fortifications. The construction of a wall running along the rock vein seems to be quite probable. Using the rock as a foundation would have made building a wall so much faster. In this case the two circular constructions could be interpreted as the remains of towers. If that is correct then it is possible that this was the position of the gate. Further studies should provide us with the answer.

The zone between the outcrop and the stone wall is no longer so well covered by the remains of building materials. Worth noting is a small area not more than 20m in diameter in the eastern section of this part of the site. It is a concentration of fired brick fragments without any clear layout on the surface (Fig. 7). This could indicate the presence of another building below surface.

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30 Edwards, Settlement, p. 85.
7. Wadi Dam et Tor, site plan on the satellite image (Google Earth).
8. Wadi Dam et Tor, central part of the site (Phot. M. Drzewiecki).

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Not far from the site at least three cemeteries have been recorded (Fig. 2). One, where Crawford found the Christian inscriptions and two tumuli cemeteries. Apart from this to the west of the fortifications a concentration of stones and fired brick fragments has been recorded. This could be another cemetery but due to its state of preservation we are unable to state this without a doubt. On a small elevation about 400m west of the fortification the remains of a circular fired brick building about 3m in diameter was registered.

It is important to point out that in this region fired brick was used extensively for various types of buildings. It seems that this should not be linked to the specifics of this area and the periodical rains which occur here more often than further down the river. In Tarfaya which faces Wadi Dam Et-Tor the use of fired bricks was minimal. Therefore, we can assume that this material was used here for other reasons. In the kingdoms of Nobadia, Makuria and Alodia mostly sacred buildings were constructed of fired brick. Perhaps then we are dealing here with this type of building? A cruciform building visible in the central section of the site could have had such a function. But we cannot say at this stage whether the whole site was a monastery. The presence of fortifications in Tarfaya could suggest another function of both these sites but does one interpretation deny the other?

Interpretation of twin sites

There are two others examples of this kind of twin site dated to the times of Kingdom of Makuria. The first one is Es-Suegi and Kaldob. The second one is Mugur island and Marakol.31

The sites in Es-Suegi and Kaldob (Fig. 1) are in the Fourth Cataract area. In the place where the river for a short time flowed in one channel. First described by major G.W. Titherington32 in 1939, and last before being submerged – by Bogdan Żurawski and Marcin Wiewióra.33 The function of those fortifications is still under discussion.

River transport in this region is made difficult by the natural conditions, so why were fortifications to the control river built there?34 Written sources do not mention any border in this area35. Włodzimierz Godlewski presents the theory that these two sites could have been a border of the Kingdom of Makuria in its early years, before Christianisation.36 Perhaps these fortifications were built in order to ease navigation through this difficult to access zone. A similar function W.Y. Adams ascribes to the Egyptian fortresses in the Second Cataract zone.37

31 Possible third location could be El-Kab and in the vicinity of Es-Sadda – after B. Żurawski personal communication.
33 Wiewióra, Architektura, pp. 209–212.
34 WELSBY, Medieval Kingdoms, pp. 135–136.
35 VANTINI, Oriental Sources, pp. .................
36 W. GODLEWSKI, MtoM, Early Makuria Research Project, PAM XVI 2005, pp. 386ff., Fig. 1.
37 Adams, Nubia, pp. 183–188.
The second example is from the region of Arduan island, similarly placed fortified sites have been recorded – on the Mugur island (MUG004) and Marakol (JWG001). According to Ali Osman and David Edwards\textsuperscript{38} these are fortifications built at a later stage in the existence of the Makurian kingdom. Their position gives rise to many doubts at they could not have controlled all the river traffic in this section of the Nile (Fig. 1). The smaller branch of the Nile which encircles Arduan island from the south-east and south cannot have been controlled from those forts. At least one more fortress would have been necessary in order to fully control the river traffic in this area.

\textit{Could Wadi Dam Et-Tor and Tarfaya have been border crossings?}

The position of Wadi Dam Et-Tor and Tarfaya is a characteristic which supports the hypothesis indicating the existence of a border checkpoint. The natural conditions here seem to ease river transport. The permanent wind coming in from the north east could aid transport going against the current.\textsuperscript{39} Upstream as well as downstream, the river is split by islands and the area around these fortifications is the sole point on a 50 km section of the Nile where the different branches come together. It is for sure a good location for a river traffic control point (Fig. 3).

The fortifications are neither impressive nor huge. Technical differences in their construction become evident when they are compared. On the surface of both sites, without specifying further, pottery linked with the Makurian kingdom has been found. However, it is important to take note of the cemeteries which are located close by the fortifications (Fig. 2). There are traces of elaborated constructions of Christian graves here. This could be proof that high-ranking religious officials were buried here. Graves of this type are often found in administrative centres or points which are now regarded as such.

It is feasible that we are dealing with a customs check-point belonging to either Makuria or Al-Abwab. The Al-Maqrizis statement that Al-Abwab was to be found only on the eastern bank of the Nile\textsuperscript{40} does not negate the situation in the Wadi Dam Et-Tor and Tarfaya zone. Perhaps these settlements were the last stop in the Kingdom of Makuria.

Help comes from other written sources describing the escape of King Semamun from Dongola to Al-Abwab.\textsuperscript{41} The account gives the number of days which the King needed to travel to the Al-Abwab border. He arrived first on the island which was fifteen days journey from Dongola. The river route was supposed to have been much more difficult due the rocky waters of the Nile. The island itself was long and three days were necessary to travel across it. According to D. A. Welsby the island described should now be linked

\textsuperscript{38} D.N. Edwards, A. Osman, The Archaeology of Arduan Island – the Mahas Survey 2000, S&N 4, 2000, p. 64, pl. XXIII.
\textsuperscript{39} Adams, Nubia, p. 34.
\textsuperscript{40} Vantini, Oriental Sources, p. 609.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p.544-545.
to the Mograt island (Fig. 1). In order to reach it from Dongola the difficult terrain of the Fourth Cataract had to be crossed. If indeed we are dealing with the Mograt island, then the King would have had to travel approximately 375 km in fifteen days, assuming that he travelled along or on the river. This means that the daily average covered had to be around 25 km. For granted, it would have taken much more time to cross the Fourth Cataract region than cover a similar distance further beyond. From the island Semamun then headed for Al-Abwab which was no longer under his jurisdiction. Al-Abwab was three days journey more. Presuming the King was travelling at the same speed – 25 km per day – then Al-Abwab would have been located within the region of Artul island (Fig. 3). It is important to take note, however, of further information which appears in written sources. The King covered this section of the journey with a much smaller group. According to the description he had left behind the majority of his subordinates and those accompanying him in the earlier part of the journey to the island. The area south of Mograt is for certain easier to cross than the Fourth Cataract region, hence the conclusion that the King could have covered more than 25 km per day. Barely 14 km south from Artul island are Wadi Dam Et-Tor and Tarfaya. Perhaps this is where Ibn Al-Furat means, when he mentions the zones which are beyond the jurisdiction of Semamun. Perhaps this is the region where his rule ends and further south Al-Abwab begins.

It is important however to note that the current level of information about these sites does not permit one conclusive description of whether during King Semamun’s flight, in approximately 1290 AD, these fortifications were actually in use. The only piece of information that we do have on their chronology is that fragments of pottery typologically linked to the Christian era in general were found there.

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WELSBY, Medieval Kingdoms, p. 245.