

# Dongola Capital of early Makuria: Citadel – Rock Tombs – First Churches

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*Dongola experienced its heyday upon becoming the main center of the Kingdom of Makuria in the early medieval period. The first step was building a citadel on an apparently uninhabited rocky plateau rising steeply above the Nile on the east bank of the river. This is believed to have taken place at the close of the 5th century and before the kings of Makuria adopted Christianity. The choice of place for the royal court was dictated by the needs of a developing kingdom. The seat of power had to be moved from the vicinity of Kushite Napata to a central position in the Kingdom of Makuria, away from the great religious complexes of the Kushite period.<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt that the decision was as much strategic as political, the current trends in defensive architecture of the time requiring towns to be fortified in order to ensure the new rulers proper economic and political security.*

## Citadel and fortifications

The citadel of Dongola was raised on a flat stretch of ground on top of a rocky crag that rose steeply from the river edge. On the north and northeast, the terrain dropped gently toward a sand-filled wadi, while on the south and southeast it was just slightly elevated above the wide plateau stretching to the south. Excavations so far have uncovered the fortifications complete with the founding only in the northwestern and northeastern corners of the citadel. The wall circuit in the northern and northwestern part of the town has been traced based on the surviving tops of the fortifications, preserved here to about 8.0 m in height. On the south side, the extent of the citadel has been observed, but no regular excavations have been undertaken (Fig.1). So far no evidence of occupation earlier than the fortifications has been recorded, but the limited extent of the investigations precludes any final determinations with regard to this. Studies of the uncovered part of the fortified circuit have determined the technical parameters of the original fortifications, as well as the stages of development and alterations introduced

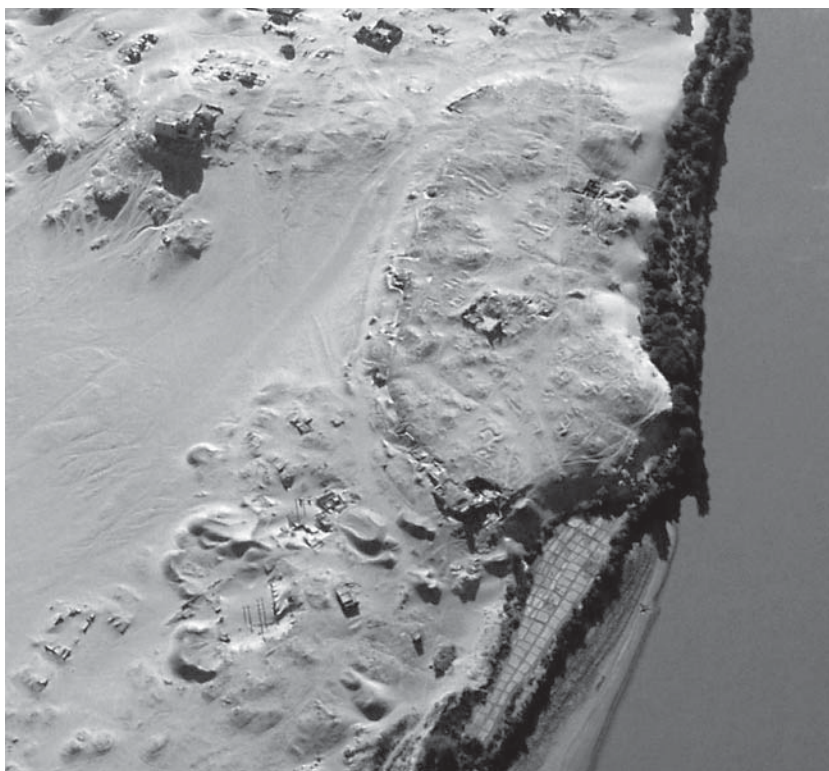


Fig. 1: The Citadel (Photo: B. Żurawski; PCMA Archives)

most likely at the close of the 12<sup>th</sup> and in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and later.

The citadel walls were founded straight on the rock without any leveling of the surface. The circuit ran all around the plateau, the wall construction and in particular sections of the plateau being adapted to the location. And so, on the river side, which was naturally defended, the walls were definitely less massive. Care was taken also to protect the river harbors, of which the northern one was of a com-

<sup>1</sup> Godlewski 2013.

mercial character, while the southern one appears to have served the private needs of the royal establishment, including providing direct access to the royal residences.

The curtain wall of Dongola was a very massive structure of mud brick, each brick measuring 41-42x18-19x9 cm, and of undressed blocks of local ferruginous sandstone, both big and small, used for the external facing. At the base, the wall was c. 5.70 m, narrowing to 5.30 m at the preserved top eight meters up. A slight inclination of the outer face of the rampart has been noted, but measurement accuracy is tainted by the erosion of the inner face. The stone facing was closely fixed to the brick core by mud mortar. At a width of c. 0.80–0.90 m, the stone facing constituted about 15% of the curtain thickness. Substantially bigger blocks were used for the towers and lower parts of the curtain. The upper sections were constructed of small blocks and slabs of stone. It should be expected that the rampart originally rose much higher than the currently preserved 8 m, attaining a height of more or less 11 m, as at Faras. There is no way of telling what the construction technique of this unpreserved part of the fortifications was.

The curtain was reinforced with projecting towers set at fairly regular intervals of 32 to 35 m. These massive structures with rounded outer face were solid-built inside, 5.70-6.30 m wide and projecting from the face of the rampart 8.50-8.90 m. The two northern towers, N.1 and N.2, were only 22 m apart, presumably because they secured the entrance gate to the citadel arranged in tower N.2. The northwestern tower was somewhat more massive than the others, most likely because it was a corner bastion (Fig. 2). This part of the circuit extending north of the commercial harbor was further reinforced with a mud-brick wall running at an angle, 3.10 m wide and terminating in a massive tower on a small rocky eminence rising high above the river bank (Fig.3). This tower, which has survived only in foundations, must have been built after AD 652, that is, after the siege laid to Dongola by the troops of Abdullahi abu Sarh. Fragments of architectural decoration, mainly from column shafts, but also from capitals and bases, believed to constitute the original interior decoration of the Dongolan Cathedral (EC.I), which was heavily damaged in this raid, were found reused in the preserved foundations (Fig.4).

The angled wall and the tower on the rock defended an artificial platform erected on the slope of the plateau rising on the north side of the main river port. This platform was constructed on a grid of casemate walls filled with earth for stability. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Pillar Church was built on this platform.



Fig. 2: Northwestern tower, western face (Photo: W. Godlewski; PCMA Archives)

The northeastern tower, which was explored during the 2012 season, was in a much better state of preservation than the described northwestern tower (Fig. 5.). It was also founded on bedrock. The width was 6.10 m, length 9.00 m, and it rose to 8.35 m in height. A house of the 17<sup>th</sup> century village located on the citadel occupied the top of the tower, using the stone ruins of the tower as its outer walls. Taking this into account, the original height of the tower and the curtain on either side of it can be estimated to about 10.50–11.00 m.

The western section of the fortifications was built on the edge of the steep rock cliff rising above the riverbank. The naturally defensive situation allowed the wall to be less thick and required no reinforcing towers. Parts of this curtain wall were uncovered in the northwestern corner of the citadel and in the central-southern part. It was 3.70 m wide at the northern end, narrowing to 2.10 m at the southern excavated end. It was constructed of mud brick with a stone facing existing only for the first 18 m from the northwestern corner bastion.

Inside the citadel, the area was occupied by regular architecture, which initially left a free space alongside the inside of the ramparts (House A.111 and Building X; (Fig. 6). The Building B. X, preceding the

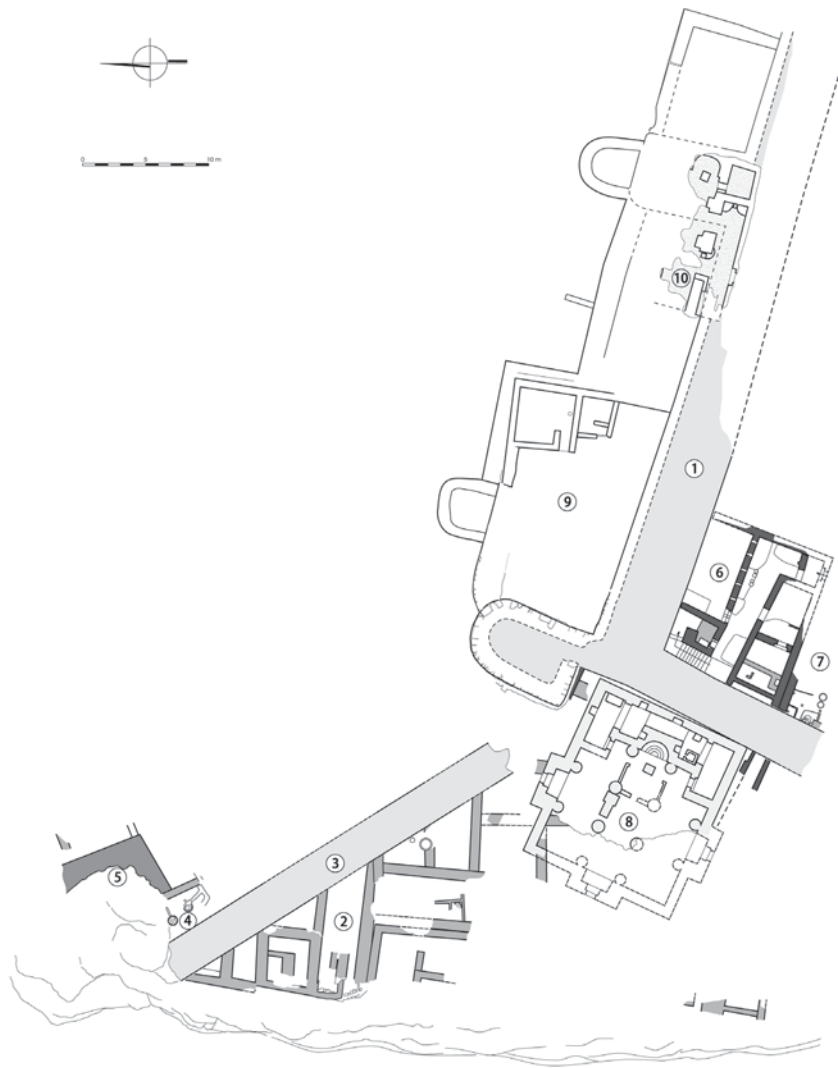


Fig. 3: Northwestern part of fortification (Plan: W. Godlewski, M. Puszkarski; PCMA Archives)



Fig. 4: Foundation of the western tower (Photo: W. Godlewski; PCMA Archives)



Fig. 5: The northeastern tower of the fortifications (Photo: W. Godlewski; PCMA Archives)



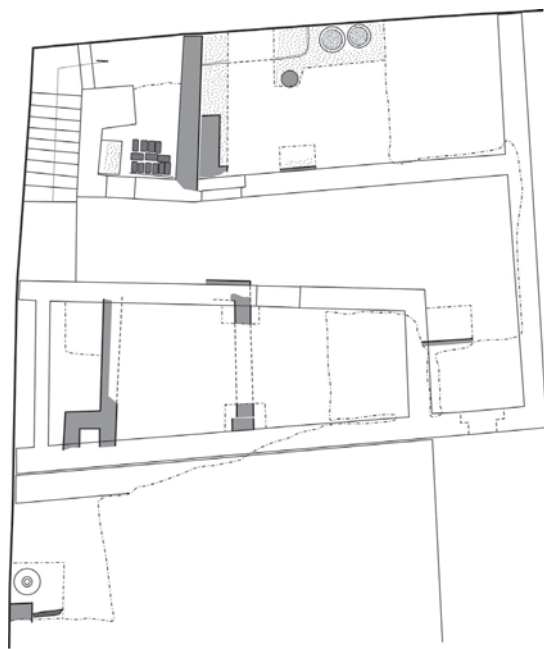


Fig. 6: Houses A.111 and H.106 (Plan: W. Godlewski, S. Maślak; PCMA Archives)

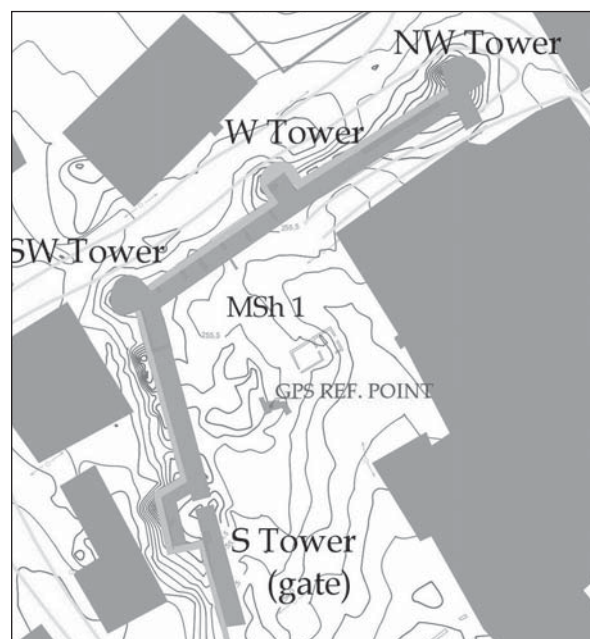


Fig. 8: Merawe el Sherig (plan W. Małkowski; PCMA Archives)



Fig. 7: Building X and B.I (plan W. Godlewski, S. Maślak; PCMA Archives)

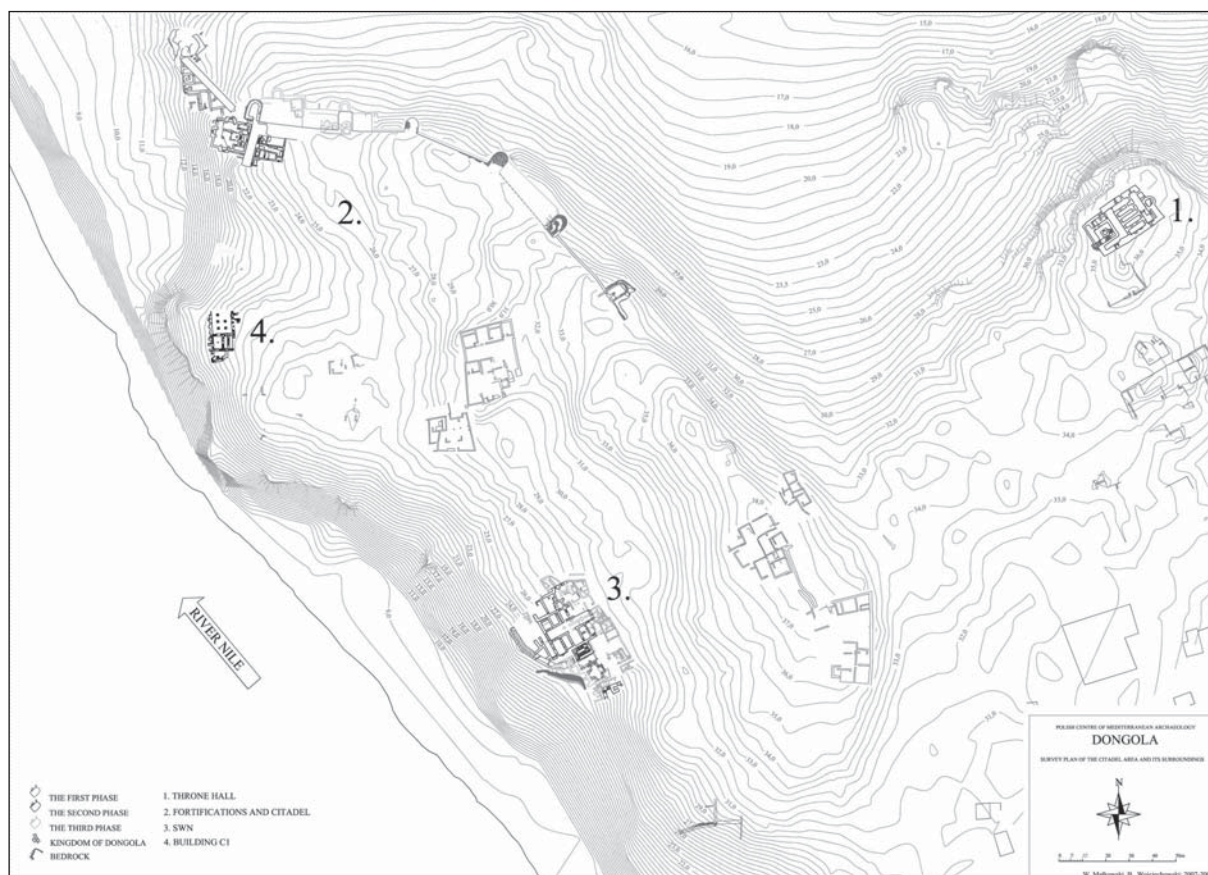


Fig. 9: Central part of Dongola: Citadel; Churches and the Throne Hall (plan M. Małkowski; PCMA Archives)

palace of Ioannes, was a mud brick structure lined up with the western defense wall, located at a distance of approximately 1.80 m from it. It formed part of a complex of architecture already recorded in other trenches: a structure in front of the southern palace facade (SWN. Building B.IV), made of red brick and furnished with a red-brick floor, and dwelling H.111, discovered in the northwestern corner of the citadel, under the foundations of house H.106 built of dried-brick. Pottery found in the foundations of SWN. Building X and H.111 is dated to the middle of the 6th century or earlier.

At least from the end of 6<sup>th</sup> century, buildings started being erected taking advantage of the rampart as a structural wall (e.g. House A.106 and SWN. Building B1 – Palace of Ioannes). This arrangement reflects a typical fortified settlement with circuit street providing entry to various structures; similar arrangements have been discovered at Ihmindi and Sabagura in the north of Nubia and were used in Roman military camps from the time of Valentinian.

The Dongolan citadel must have had regular architecture standing inside the walls already in the middle of the 6th century because the great sacral complexes of the period when Makuria adopted Christianity (OC and BX) were constructed outside

the stronghold, on a spot to the north of the citadel, where later the cathedrals were located as well.

The fortifications of Dongola were built by skilled builders already experienced in similar enterprises erected earlier in the Napata region, at Merowe el Sherig<sup>2</sup> and Bakhit (Fig. 8). The actual technique of construction differed, because the earlier complexes had the lower parts of ramparts built of broken stone and the upper parts of mud brick with an outside stone facing being added at some point. It should be remembered, however, that compared to Dongola these were quite modest examples of military architecture. In all likelihood, the ramparts at Dongola were raised at the close of the 5th century.

Once the Makurian kings signed the *baqt* treaty with the Caliphate in AD 652 (the peace treaty was observed by both sides for 520 years), they chose the citadel with all of its economic resources as their royal residence. The religious center with the cathedrals, the town and various workshops were located outside its walls, mainly to the north. Even the Throne Hall of the Kings of Makuria was erected away from the fortified rock, in a prominent location further to the east (Fig. 9, col. fig. 17).

<sup>2</sup> Godlewski 2008, 463–469.

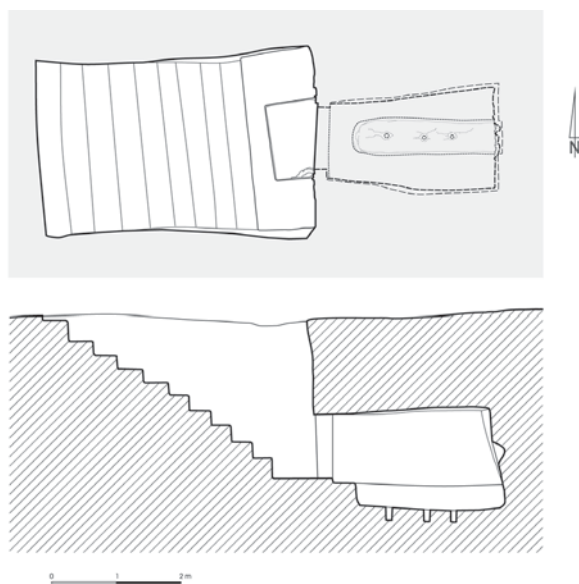


Fig. 10: Rock Tomb no 1 (plan and cross-section M. Gartkiewicz; M. Puskarski; PCMA Archives)

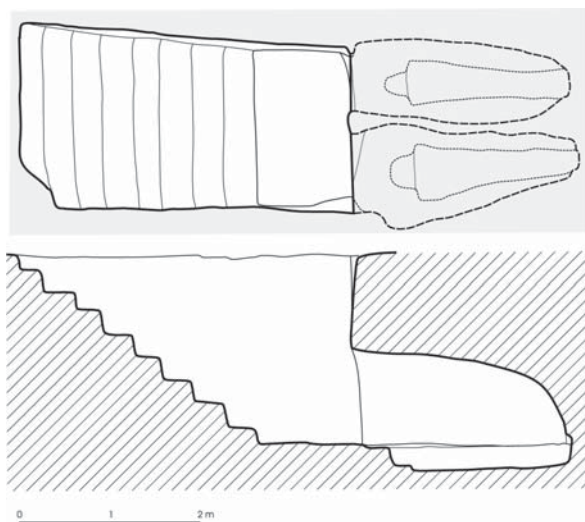


Fig. 11: Rock Tomb no 2 (plan and cross-section W. Godlewski, M. Puskarski; PCMA Archives)

### Rock-cut tombs

Two rock-cut tombs are to be found on the southeastern fringes of the modern village of El-Ghaddar, just 2.5 km away from the Citadel. The rocky rise is not vast in size and its surface has been heavily eroded. An extensive tumulus necropolis of Post-Meroitic date extends not far away to the northeast, in the direction of Gebel Ghaddar.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Godlewski & Kociankowska-Brozek 2010; Mahmud el Tayeb 1994.

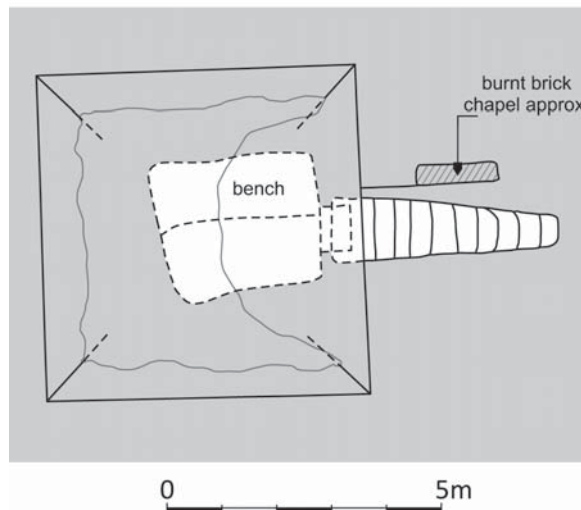
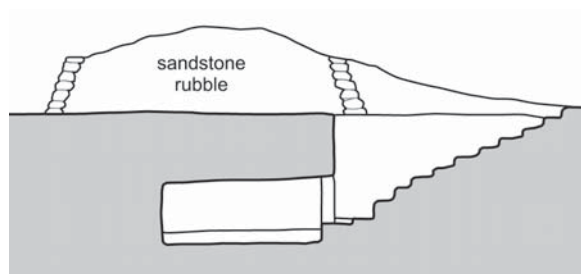


Fig. 12: Jebel Barkal, Bar. 16 (plan and cross-section D. Dunham, S. Maślak)

Discovered by local inhabitants, the tombs were first explored in 1948, but no records of these investigations were kept. The tombs were cleared once more in 1971 and again in 1981. They were documented as highly interesting examples of funerary architecture from the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Nothing is known of the burials and potential tomb equipment except for a note in the NCAM archives, describing the finding of 'fragments of bone and an earthenware lamp of about 13 cm in diameter' inside RT.1.<sup>4</sup>

Quite evidently there were no more than the two tombs carved in the soft sandstone in this location and erosion has removed all trace of any kind of superstructure presumably accompanying the graves. It could have been constructed of stone blocks and thus did not escape the attention of those in search of building material. The tombs themselves are just 8 m apart. Both have burial shafts with a wide staircase leading to the burial chamber from the west.

The layout, similar but not identical, with a lintel decoration in the form of a cross on the façade of RT.1 and anthropomorphic niches cut in the floor, leaving

<sup>4</sup> Jakobielski 1982.



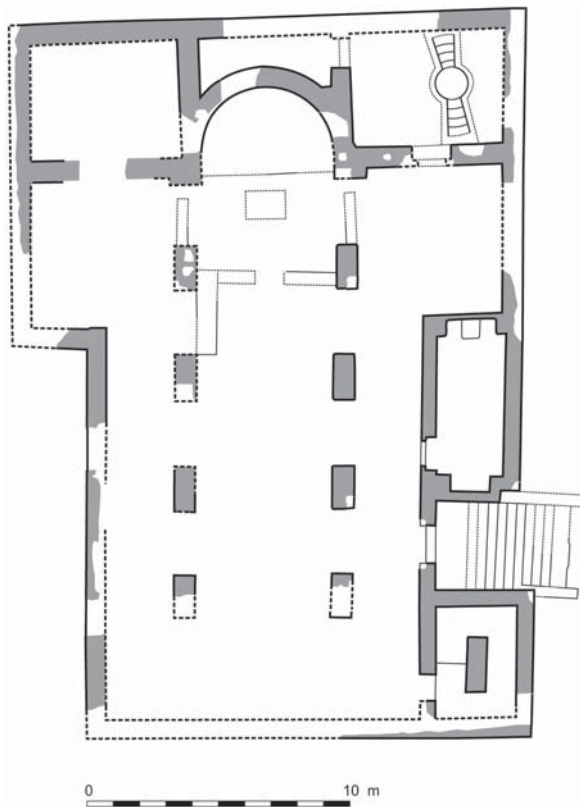


Fig. 13: Old Church (plan P. Gartkiewicz, M. Puskarski; PCMA Archives)

a rounded place for the head oriented to the west, leaves no doubt as to the Christian attribution of the tombs (Fig.10). Tomb RT.2 with its two crypts finds a close parallel in a masonry tomb located beneath the apse of the Commemorative Building BX, although there the shaft entrance had been placed on the eastern side for purely practical reasons (Fig.11).

The only possible dating is based on the lintel decoration from the facade of RT.1. No monumental tombs of a similar kind have ever been found in Dongola and we are still missing any fragments of funerary stelae belonging to the Makurian kings. Therefore, we are entitled to think that their graves are still waiting to be discovered, perhaps somewhere in the vaults of the sacral structures on the Citadel. On the other hand, the monumental character of the rock tombs and their localization near the tumulus cemetery and some distance from the Citadel suggests that they had been made for rulers of Makuria who had already moved their seat to the freshly constructed fortress, but had still retained the age-old Nubian tradition of being buried away from their residence.

The architecture of the tombs is also telling. The staircase leads directly to the burial chambers, as in the well-documented Kushite tradition, not to men-

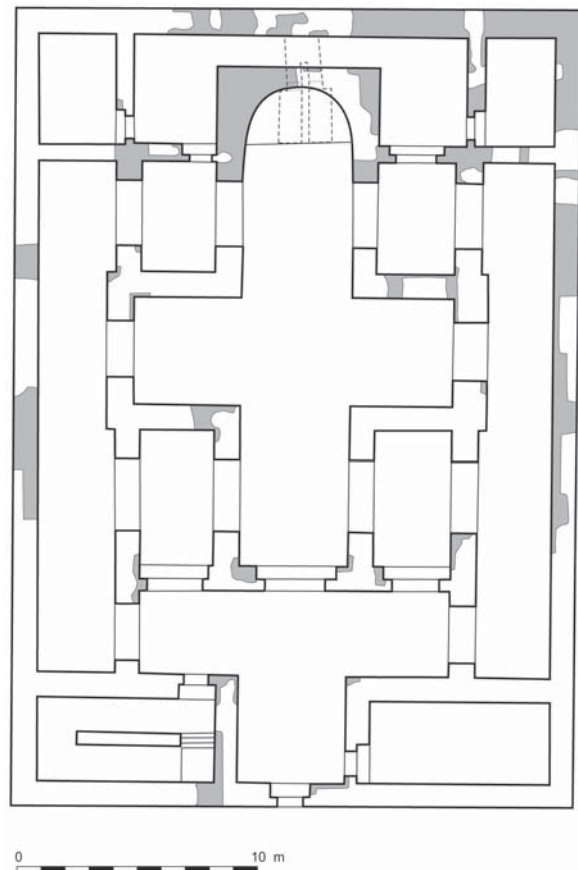


Fig. 14: Building X (plan W. Godlewski, M. Puskarski; PCMA Archives)

tion tombs of Gebel Barkal south cemetery Bar.16.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the Nuri and Meroe tombs however, there are no offering chambers in Dongola and this absence could be explained by a change of ritual imposed by the adoption of new religious norms. In the Christian tradition, the dead did not need to be furnished with any tomb equipment or burial offerings (Fig.12).

### Churches dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> century

The first churches were built in Dongola in a new quarter north of the Citadel. This sparsely settled area of the Citadel accorded opportunities for unhindered development, drawing heavily on outside inspirations to meet the growing needs. In their shape, these new buildings depended largely on the preferences and traditions brought to Makuria by Christian missionaries, but their size and building technique were due to teams of local builders who had recently trained their skills in the construction of the Citadel. The first sacral structures in Dongola,

<sup>5</sup> Dunham 1957, 162-163.

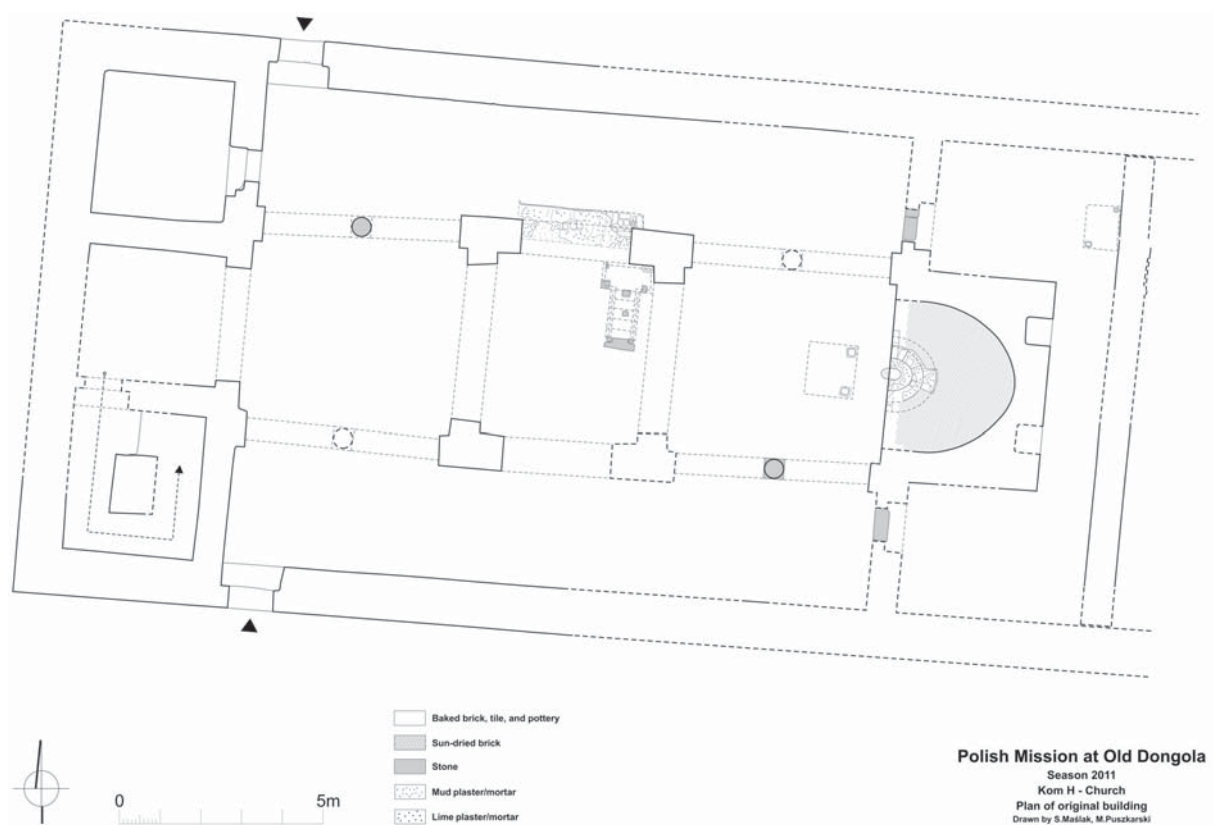


Fig. 15: Monastic church. HC (plan W. Godlewski, S. Maślak; PCMA Archives)

the Old Church (OC) and Building X (BX), as well as the Mosaic Church I (MC.I) located already on the southern fringes of the Letti basin, and also the first commemorative buildings, Early Church D (EDC) and the Cruciform Building (CB), and the church in the monastery on kom H (HC) were erected on very different plans and introduced a great variety of architectural templates to Dongola. It is also important that a considerable number of religious buildings of very varied function was constructed in rather less than fifty years, a very short period indeed.<sup>6</sup>

The two largest buildings, OC and BX, were erected alongside one another, giving rise to a religious complex that would continue to develop for the next 800 years. As there were no pagan temples in Dongola, the missionaries and first bishops were not tempted to convert them into churches, as was Theodore, the bishop of Philae, who did this systematically in Philae and in Nobadia. In Dongola, everything was based on imported patterns right from the start.

In the initial period of Christianity in Dongola, two church buildings were erected: the Old Church (OC) and Building X (BX), differing in layout and construction, and likely also in function (Fig.13 and

Fig. 14). As much as the Old Church was certainly an ordinary church, the more monumental Building X with its two crypts under the apse must have served a commemorative function. Three other smaller buildings believed to belong to this period were executed with different functions in mind, hence the varying architectural solutions. The Mosaic Church (MC.I) was a small, three-aisled basilica serving a local population, and may be connected with the nearby rock-cut tombs, interpreted as royal tombs. Early Church D (EDC) and the Cruciform Building (CB) were commemorative monuments in all likelihood. EDC is connected with a tomb located by its northwest corner. One of the most ambitious monument, was monastic church HC (Fig.15). The architectural study of this structure has demonstrated that the original foundation was a three-aisled basilica with central tower and presumed wooden roof. None other of the churches currently known from Makuria represents this type, which is modeled on late 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine models, e.g., El-Alahan in Cilicia.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the monastery church features the tripartite design of the eastern and western ends of the basilica with characteristic twin entrances from the north and south in the western part that was

<sup>6</sup> Godlewski 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Krautheimer 1981, 258-260.



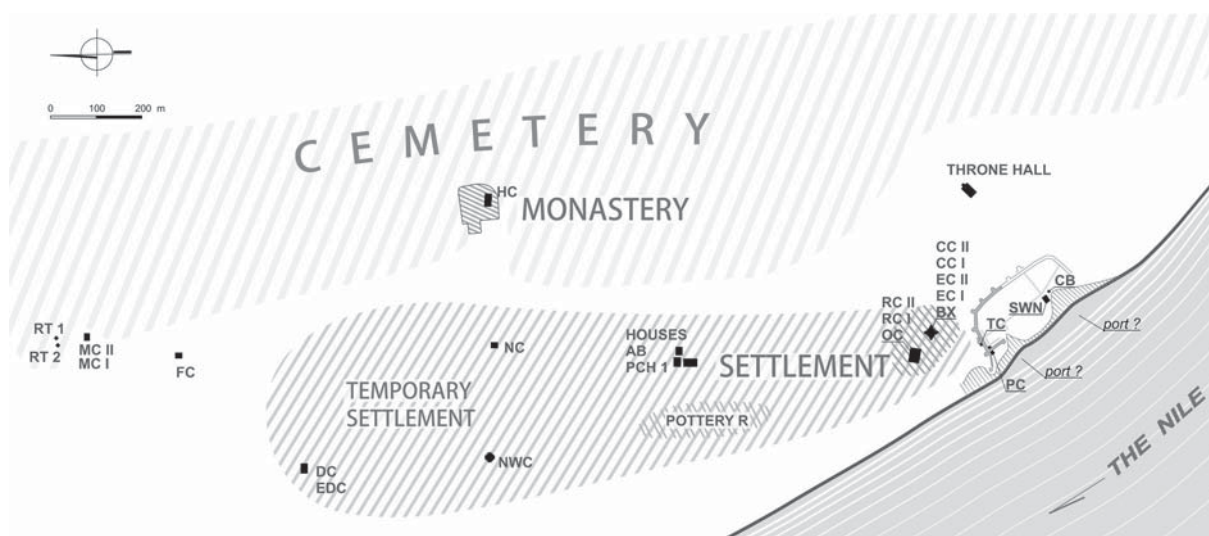


Fig. 16: Old Dongola, localization of the sites and buildings (plan W. Godlewski, M. Puskarski; PCMA Archives)

typical of Dongolan church architecture in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. The staircase in the southwestern unit must have led up to the emporas, which were supported on the columns standing east and west of the central tower. A *synthronon* filled the apse behind the sanctuary, which occupied a spot in the eastern end of the nave, although the position of the original altar screen has proved impossible to trace. An altar stood in the *prothesis* (northeastern unit) by the east wall, and the pulpit was located in the nave, by the northeastern pillar. Its position at right angles to the pillar is again a feature not encountered in other Dongolan church complexes. All these features considered, the monastery church on Kom H should be recognized as representing a highly untypical architectural design.<sup>8</sup>

Potsherds from the fill of a grave excavated in 2006<sup>9</sup> can be taken as proof that the monastery church was built in the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, contemporary to the Old Church. The foundation of the Monastery of Anthony the Great in Dongola played most probably a crucial role in the Christianization of the royal family of Dongola.

### Dongola – capital of Makuria

The weakening of the central authority in the Meroitic Kingdom and progressing social changes in the Butana caused by population migration and Aksumite aggression resulted in the collapse of Meroitic administration throughout the extensive domain. The process, which took place in the first half of

the 4<sup>th</sup> century, was not uniform in all parts of the kingdom and it is possible to distinguish three general areas which roughly correspond with the three Nubian kingdoms that emerged in the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century: Nobadia, Makuria and Alodia. Surviving written sources inform us relatively detailed of what was happening in Butana and in the territory between the First and Second Cataracts. These sources, mostly Roman and Aksumite, originated for the most part from outside the territories in question.<sup>10</sup> With regard to the region between the Third and Fourth Cataracts no known texts exist and any reconstruction of events in this territory has to depend on archaeological sources.

During the Napatan and Meroitic periods Napata was the most important political and religious center in the territory between the Third and Fourth Cataracts. It remained an important urban center in the terminal period of the Meroitic Kingdom as indicated by its still functioning temples, Meroitic palaces and royal cemeteries around the sacred mountain at Gebal Barkal. There is no reliable study of the functioning of the Napatan center in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, but there can be no doubt that it was witnessing important social changes during this period, leading to the transformation of the society from Meroitic to Makurian and to the emergence of a new statehood in the form of the kingdom of Makuria. The main cemeteries of the regional elite of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century were preserved around Napata. Research is most advanced on the tumuli fields of el-Zuma,<sup>11</sup> but the much more extensive burial ground at Tanqasi, which remained in use

<sup>8</sup> Godlewski 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Bagińska 2008.

<sup>10</sup> FHN III 1998, 1076–1216.

<sup>11</sup> el Tayeb 2012.

for a much longer period, is most probably more important for understanding social evolution in the region.<sup>12</sup> Other extensive necropolis in the region are that at el-Haraz and the small but interesting cemetery at Kassinger Bahri.<sup>13</sup>

In considering the so-called post-Meroitic cemeteries (although Tanqasi also functioned in the late Meroitic period) one should recall the forgotten but extremely important southern necropolis at Gebel Barkal, situated to the west of the sacred mountain (Bar. 16-17; 19; 21-25). It was a small burial ground of just a few tombs, which were plundered and destroyed, but which distinctly preserved the tradition of the royal tombs of the Northern Necropolis at Meroe.<sup>14</sup> The pyramids and chapels are virtually non-existent, but the rock-cut burial chambers, limited to just one room in each case, were always preceded by a rock-cut staircase. In architectural terms, these axial complexes extending in the horizontal plane differ visibly from the elite graves at Zuma or Tanqasi, which are evidently vertical in design with burial and offering chambers being accessed from a vertical U-shaped shaft. This differentiation is of fundamental significance for understanding social relations in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. When compared to the reduced “royal” tombs at Napata, these increasingly elaborate elite burials at Tanqasi and Zuma can be viewed as evidence for the growing social and economic importance of the elite class matching the fading social role of the royal “family”. Such a phenomenon is apparent in most transitional periods when central authority, usually of regional character, is in decline and therefore weak even though the social structure continues to function unchanged. Continuity in the region in question is also attested by Napata remaining a major religious center. The temple of Amun in the city shows no evidence of a sudden destruction or decline and its continued importance is suggested by the localization of the mentioned southern “royal” burial ground at Gebel Barkal. The absence of both, Christian graves in the elite cemeteries and early Christian church foundations in the region, constitute a further proof of a stable religious tradition being maintained with little change. It would suggest a strong disinterest on the part of the Napatans in converting to Christianity and their gradual decline in the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

The economic background of this transformation is not known and there does not seem to have been any major environmental change in the region,

which could have stood at the root of this process. There must have been other causes for the declining importance of the region. A shift of the political and religious power center to the region of Dongola may have been the most important reason, along with conversion to Christianity, which catapulted the new kingdom into the Byzantine *oikumene*. In economic terms, this resulted in long distance trade overshadowing considerably a local economy based on agriculture and animal husbandry. The development of Makuria in the 6<sup>th</sup> century appears to have followed this trend. The new center in Dongola, situated in the middle of the kingdom and far from the religious centers of a bygone age in Napata and Kawa, was based on the rise of a royal family which distinguished itself more and more from an increasingly egalitarian society in the Napatan region and which legitimized its authority by embracing Christianity as its religion and nurturing close ties with the Byzantine Empire.

Dongola was founded on an entirely new site with no earlier occupation, a rocky eminence on the eastern bank of the Nile, which lay in the neighborhood of agriculturally developed regions in the Letti basin to the north and the environs of Banganarti to the south. Large seasonal islands forming by the river and the wadis on the western bank, which facilitated contacts with the sub-Saharan region and Kordofan, also played an important role. Indeed, the latter element may have been of crucial importance in choosing the location of the new capital and surely helped in developing long-distance trade. Even as the royal family of Dongola, doubtless of Meroitic origin, established its power base in a new location affording social and economic security, it must have been planning an ideological revolution in the religious sphere. The decision to convert to Christianity was evidently carried out quickly and the process probably did not take more than two generations, as suggested by the two “royal” tombs cut in the rock on the southern fringes of the “post-Meroitic” burial ground at El Ghaddar. The transfer of the power base from Napata to Dongola and the establishment of commercial and religious ties with Byzantium gave the royal family of Dongola a new position of power within the kingdom, as well as supernatural empowerment legitimized by a new religion.

12 Godlewski 2008, 469-476; Klimaszevska-Drabot 2008, 483-491; Osypińska 2008, 492-497.

13 el Tayeb 2012, 52-57.

14 Dunham 1957, 44-45; 154-158; 160; 162.

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# EIN FORSCHERLEBEN ZWISCHEN DEN WELTEN

ZUM 80. GEBURTSTAG VON STEFFEN WENIG

HERAUSGEGEBEN VON

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