

THE OLD DONGOLA FORTIFICATIONS

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Preliminary investigations of the city fortifications located on the north-western slope of Kom A were the prime objective of the mission during the 1990 season in Old Dongola.¹

Relics of mud-brick walls have been observed on the surface around the perimeter of Kom A in an archaeological context suggestive of the late medieval period, most probably following the fall of the Nubian kingdom. In the course of removing deposits accumulated on the slope of Kom A it was found that post-Christian layers lay immediately on top of the remains of structures from the 6th-7th centuries. It would appear then that the structures in this area underwent total destruction sometime in the 13th-14th century with some of them being dismantled down to bedrock and the entire slope being exposed to erosion by wind and precipitation.

A massive mud-brick wall 3.1 m wide was found to run a straight course from the northwest to the southeast for over 32 m. The northern end of it adjoined a rock outcrop now largely eroded away, which must have been significantly higher at the time when the defenses were built and must have been of strategic importance as the northernmost point of Kom A. At the other end, the wall, which is preserved only in foundations not exceeding 0.7 m in height at any point and often destroyed down to bedrock, disappears entirely and seems to have no relation with the stone wall built nearby.

Excavations cleared a roughly triangular area west of the mud-brick wall which clearly served as its northeastern boundary. The structures identified there all touch upon the mud-brick wall. They

¹ The excavations on Kom A were headed by the present writer with the help of Mr. Jarosław Dobrowolski (architect). For the results, see also W. Godlewski, *The fortifications of Old Dongola. Report on the 1990 season, Archéologie du Nil Moyen*, 5, 1991, in print.

seem to have been constructed simultaneously with the wall and appear to be connected with it in a functional, if not structural sense. They obviously constitute part of an architectural project, strategic in nature. It consists of a network of mud-brick walls forming units which were subsequently filled in with debris in order to create a flat building site.

Both the rampart wall and the platform structure are dated mainly on the grounds of pottery recovered during the excavations. The entire assemblage belongs without exception to the early period and should be dated in all probability to the 6th-7th century AD.

East of the northern end of the rampart wall, just off the rocky outcrop constituting its termination, two circular mud-brick structures filled with gravel were cleared. Both were on bedrock level, at a distance of 1 m from one another. The southern structure was round, roughly 0.80-0.95 m in diameter, with a slightly flattened eastern side. It consisted of upended mud-bricks laid directly upon bedrock; the surviving remains are some 0.4 m high. On the east there was an opening (9 x 14.5 cm.). Outside it, the rock was hollowed out in a 0.4 m long, narrow channel, the width of which matched the opening. This furnace was found filled with alternating layers of iron ore and charcoal. It would appear that the smelting process in this structure had been abandoned at an early stage. A C¹⁴ dating of the charcoal -from the southern furnace narrows the date to the very beginning of the 6th century (AD 510).² In this respect the Dongolan structures, only the second of their type to be known from the area of the Sudan, are later than the furnaces uncovered in Meroe.³

² The dating was carried out by Prof. M. Pazdur from the C¹⁴ Laboratory of Gliwice Polytechnic (Gd.-5753).

³ P.L. Shinnie, F.J. Kense, Meroitic iron working, *Meroitica* 6, 1982, pp. 17-28; R. Tylecote, Metal working at Meroe, Sudan, *Meroitica* 6, 1982, pp. 29-42.

The rocky outcrop which terminated the northern end of the wide mud-brick wall appears to have had a stone structure reinforcing it on the east and south. The structure or rather its foundations were constructed without the use of mortar, directly upon the sloping rock surface. The material used was a rosy granite and included numerous shattered column drum fragments, capitals and bases. Only the exterior face of the wall was laid in straight courses. The mentioned granite foundation structure obviously served as the foundation or lower part of a spacious tower which must have once stood upon the rocky eminence, doubtless forming part of the fortification system mentioned earlier. The entire assemblage of architectural decoration fragments recovered from the relics of the granite foundation structure appears to be homogenous as far as material is concerned, as well as in style and chronology. One may easily conclude that they all originated from some monumental building which suffered a violent and presumably intentional destruction. Considering the evidence of church building in Dongola presently available, one may suppose that the architectural granite fragments came from a basilica destroyed by Arab troops during their raid on Dongola in AD 652.⁴ This may have been the Church of the Stone Pavement I.⁵

In the eastern part of the excavated sector, where surface relics of mud-brick walls were considered as post-Christian at first, investigations reached bedrock, revealing structures belonging to four different stages in the construction of city fortifications. The limited area covered by the excavations precludes as yet a detailed characteristic of particular levels.

Undoubtedly the oldest structure is a massive tower which must have constituted a corner of the extensive fortification system of

⁴ W. Godlewski, The Cruciform Church site in Old Dongola. Sequence of buildings from the 6th to the 18th century, *Nubica I/II*, 1990, pp. 523-524.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 519-523.

Dongola. Only the western facade of this structure has been cleared so far and even that not along its entire length, so not much may be said of its plan. It would appear that the tower was an elongated structure with a rounded northern end, which projected well beyond the line of the walls. It cannot be excluded that it had once been part of a gateway. The tower was founded on bedrock. Mud brick was used to construct the core, while the exterior was faced with large irregular stone blocks with smaller rock chips filling the spaces in between. The tower was evidently a structure of considerable height for the preserved relics of the mud-brick core rise to a height of 6.75 m, while the stone facing, which was doubtless the object of plunder in modern times, reaches 5.1 m at the most.