Town history

General Director of Sudan Antiquities, Dr. Nigm ed-Din Mohammed Sherif visiting with members of the Polish Mission during the excavations of the Cruciform Church in 1974

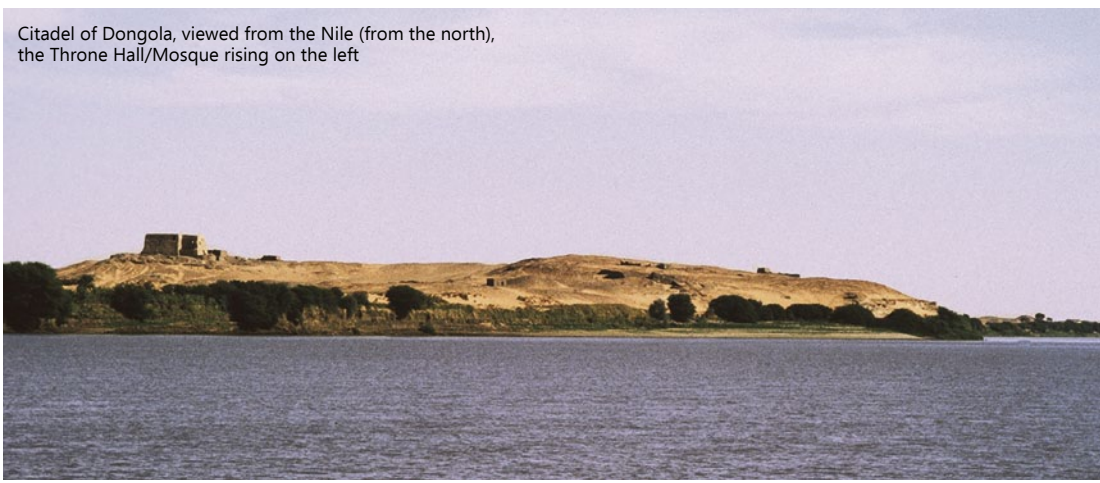
Dongola (Nubian *Tungul*, Arabic *Dunqula*) was among the most important centers of the medieval kingdom of Makuria (Godlewski 2004b). The town was situated on a rocky eminence overlooking the eastern bank of the Nile, halfway between the Third and Fourth Cataracts, at the southern edge of the Letti Basin, which served the city as an economic base. Contrary to earlier suggestions made by egyptologists regarding the town's importance already in the Napatan period, it now appears that the city was not established until the end of the 5th century. The founder was likely one of the first kings of Makuria. He raised a huge fortress at a site away from the religious centers of the earlier kingdom of Kush (Napata), but located centrally in the new kingdom (see map of Early Makuria, page 9). The massive fortifications were built of mud brick and broken ferruginous sandstone.

This settlement was one of a series of newly established, heavily fortified sites that the rulers of Makuria apparently decided to build along the bank of the Nile. The purpose appears to have been more socioeconomic than military, the idea being presumably to foster a Byzantine-influenced process of urbanization. Thus, the Dongolan citadel became a center of power with royal palaces and public buildings, and a place for concentrating economic resources.

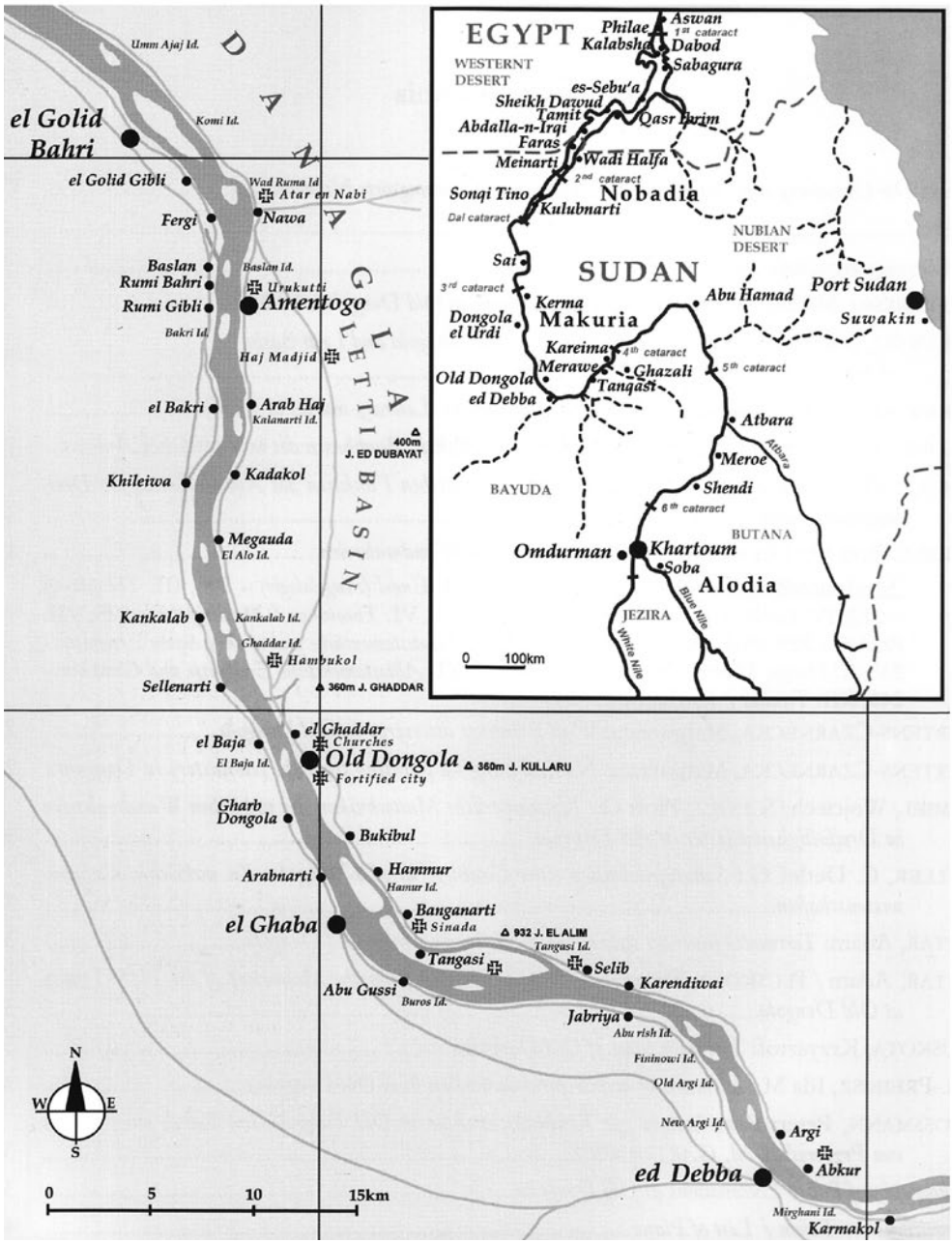
The first rulers to reside in Dongola may have been buried in rock-cut tombs erected in the desert to the north of the town, at the southern extremity of the burial ground near Gebel Ghaddar. Nothing but the burial chambers have been preserved, both with broad steps leading down from the west.

A new challenge came with the conversion of the kingdom to Christianity in the mid 6th century. The citadel, which must have been fully occupied already by the beginning of the 6th century, could not hold all the churches that the missionaries and rulers of Makuria expected to erect. New temples — the three-aisled Old Church with dwarf transept and the commemorative cruciform Building X inscribed into a rectangle — had to be constructed on more or less undeveloped ground to the north of the citadel (see the plan on page 18).

The missionaries, whose task was to Christianize Makuria, may have come from Constantinople and the first churches at Dongola had much in common with church architecture in Palestine and Syria. By the 570s, a bishopric had been established in Dongola. On the site of Building X, desecrated by a torrential Nile flood, a cathedral was



Citadel of Dongola, viewed from the Nile (from the north), the Throne Hall/Mosque rising on the left

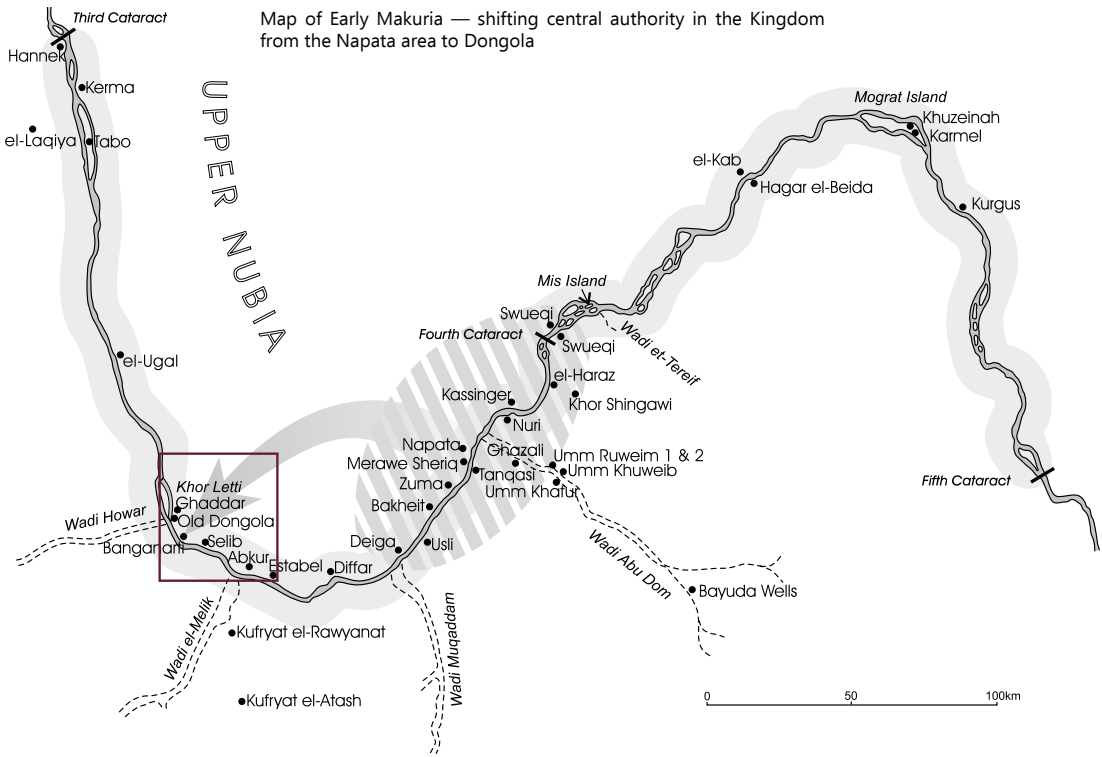


Location of Old Dongola and its environs, between the Letti Basin on the north and Tangasi Island on the south (After Jakobielski, Scholz [eds] 2001: Map on page VIII)

erected. EC.I was a five-aisled columnar basilica, dubbed by the excavators the Church of the Stone Pavement (see below, Cathedrals, pages 49ff.). Finely worked columns of pink granite supported a wooden ceiling. The pastophoria and connecting corridor running behind the apse formed a block arrangement in the east end of the building, and a stone balustrade screened off the sanctuary with table altar in the eastern end of the nave; the apse had a *synthronon* built into it. The new building incorporated under the apse the two crypts which had been part of the earlier commemorative structure. Buried in these crypts were two men, who are presumed to be the apostles of the kingdom.

Still before the end of the 6th century, one of the first Dongolan bishops — Merkurios to believe a monogram on a surviving keystone of an inner arcade — probably established a monastery in the desert about 1.5 km east of the citadel hill. The church, a three-aisled basilica with central tower supported on four stone pillars, is the only part of the original foundation, which has been explored. As suggested by a funerary stela of the archbishop Georgios (who was also archimandrite) from 1113, discovered in the Northwest Annex to the west of the complex, the monastery was dedicated to the Great Anthony.

Having incorporated Nobadia at the turn of the 6th century and in the 7th century, Makuria came into direct contact with Byzantine Egypt. Numerous finds of Egyptian amphorae, identified as products of pottery workshops in Aswan, Middle Egypt and the Mareotis, as well as amphora imports from Palestine and North Africa, uncovered in deposits inside the "Palace of Ioannes" on the Citadel, attest to the intensity of the trade relations between the two countries.



Map of Early Makuria — shifting central authority in the Kingdom from the Napata area to Dongola

Contacts with the Chalcedonian bishops of Alexandria quickly led to the establishment of new bishoprics in Makuria, permitting a rapid development of the Church in the kingdom.

In the middle of the 7th century, Arab troops laid siege to the citadel, but failed to take the fortress. The peace treaty or *baqt*, which was a continuation of the earlier relations with Byzantine Egypt, that the reigning King Qalidurut negotiated with Egypt's governor 'Abdallah b. Abī Sarh regulated Makuria's political and economic relations with the caliphate for the next 520 years. The city remained unconquered, but the cathedral was destroyed and other buildings north of the fortifications may have also incurred damages.

Under King Qalidurut and his heir Zacharias the ruins were rebuilt and the town developed harmoniously. The fortifications were enlarged with a huge tower being built on a platform on top of a rocky outcrop overlooking the river (see Citadel and fortifications, pages 20–23). Used in the foundations of this tower were the shafts and capitals of pink granite coming from the ruins of the first cathedral. The cathedral itself was rebuilt as a five-aisled domed basilica (EC.II), the dome and ceilings supported on piers and the floor of the presbytery covered with a geometric mosaic made of colorful desert pebbles.

Even before the end of the 7th century a new complex, the Church of the Granite Columns, was built on the spot of the Old Church. It was an uniquely Dongolan foundation, combining elements of a central plan, that is, two aisles ending in apses crossing in the center of the structure, with typical features of a basilica: columnar naos and narthex (see Cathedrals, pages 49ff.). The naos of the new cathedral was surrounded by side annexes serving different liturgical functions (pastophoria, baptistery). This building became a model for the cathedral that bishop Paulos founded in Pachoras in 707 (Godlewski 2006a).

Still in the reign of Qalidurut, a small cruciform structure with a dome in the center and an entrance in each of the arms was erected in front of the south facade of the royal palace in the southwestern part of the citadel. Fragmentary murals evince the quality of the interior finishing of this building, which appears to have been a kind of monument raised in commemoration of the defenders of Dongola (see Commemorative monuments, pages 35ff.).

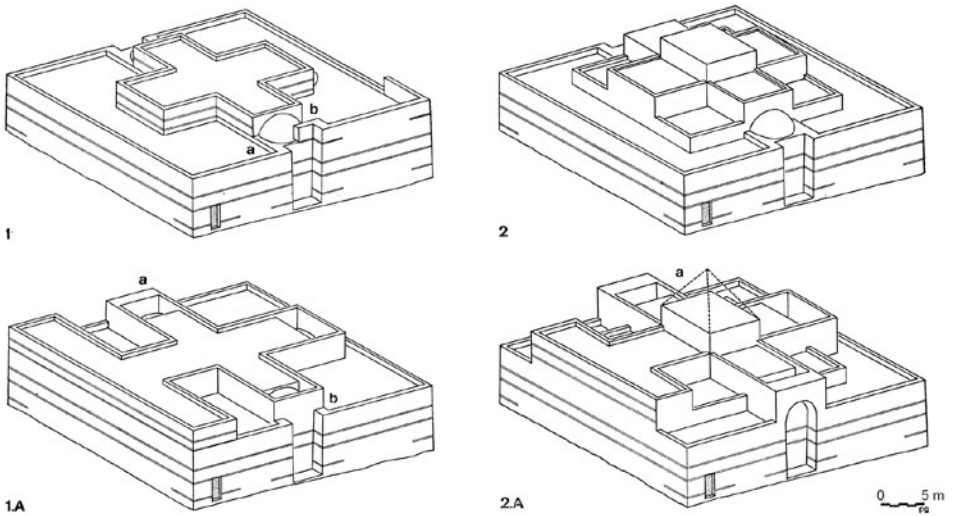
Dongola of the 6th and 7th centuries was not only a citadel and complex of cathedrals. To the north there extended for more than a kilometer a vast urban district with regular residential architecture. The houses, all storied, measured some 100–120 m^2 in ground area (see Houses, pages 96ff.). The plans were functional: there were toilet facilities in the buildings and living quarters on the upper floor, where the standard of interior finishing clearly surpassed that of the service rooms on the ground floor. The upper-floor rooms had big windows fitted

Commemorative Building (B.III.1) on the Citadel — digital reconstruction

with terracotta grilles and the columnar halls opened on terraces with stone balustrades. In House A (see Houses, pages 103ff.), there was a bathroom on the ground floor with a furnace for heating water, which was then piped through to two pools for bathing; hot air from the furnace was circulated through flues in the walls to heat the building. Murals on the bathroom walls depicted Victorious Christ next to archangels, warrior saints, tonda with portraits and inscriptions, symbols and floral motifs. Friezes, symbols and floral motifs were also recurrent in the painted decoration of walls in other rooms on the ground floor.

The most representative buildings in Dongola, symbols of the kingdom, were founded in the 9th century (Godlewski 2002b), in the reign of Zacharias (*Augustus*) and Georgios (*Caesar*), who ruled Makuria jointly for twenty years (835–856). Upon the return of King Georgios from Baghdad in 836, a monumental Cruciform Church was erected on the spot of the domed basilica (see Cathedrals, pages 49ff.). This was to be the biggest building in the entire kingdom. The central part of the building, which was connected with the arms by porticoes, was covered with a dome that could have risen even 28 m above the pavement. The eastern

Cruciform Church in the Lower Town — digital reconstruction



Studies of the presumed form of the building of the Third Cathedral (After Gartkiewicz 1990)

arm of the structure contained a chapel above the crypts of the apostles of Makuria. The church became a symbol of the kingdom and the pride of its rulers until it was destroyed during the Mamluk wars in the late 13th century.

In the 9th century, a new royal palace was built on a rocky outcrop east of the citadel (see Throne Hall, pages 43ff.). The actual throne hall was situated on the upper floor and there was a terrace approached by a monumental set of steps, affording a breathtaking view of the town and river. Murals decorated the walls of the staircase and throne hall. This Byzantine concept of architecture expressed most fully the aspirations of the rulers of Makuria and their fond attachment to Byzantine tradition.

A small but very important church was constructed in the 9th century as well, on the riverbank, just below the western line of the fortifications (see Churches, page 67). The central plan of the Pillar Church, built on a cross-over-rectangle, highlighted yet again the genius of Dongolan architects.

Dongola in the 9th–11th centuries reached an apogee of development. Writing around 1200, the Egyptian monk Abu el-Makarim (Vantini 1975: OSN 326) described the town: "Here is the throne of the king. It is a large city on the bank of the blessed Nile, and contains many churches and large houses and wide streets. The King's house is lofty, with several domes built of red brick".

But Dongola also featured important architectural complexes situated outside the city. In the desert, some 1500 m to the northeast of the citadel, there lay a vast monastery, the origins of which are purportedly ascribed to the first bishops of Dongola (see Monastery, pages 79ff.). The Northwest Annex, raised against the wall of the monastic compound sometime in the 11th–12th centuries, has been excavated, but it still defies interpretation; what is clear by now is that it was altered and renovated repeatedly. It was both sacral and residential, and its walls were painted extensively (Martens-Czarnecka 2011). The repertory constitutes today the fullest testimony to Dongolan painting in the Late Period, including a curious new trend of representing the dignitaries of the kingdom, presumably members of the royal family, inside small chapels, depicted under the protection of

an archangel and the apostles. This new type of official representation is evidenced for the first time in the second half of the 11th century and is connected with Georgios (1031–1113), archimandrite and archistilites, later archbishop of Dongola (Łajtar 2002). In any case, archbishop Georgios built his tomb with a chapel above a funerary crypt inside the monastery annex. The walls of the crypt were covered with a unique selection of Greek and Coptic texts of a religious and magic nature. The next bishops of Dongola after Georgios were also buried in the crypt (see Mausoleum of Bishops, pages 87ff.).

Dongola of the late 12th and 13th centuries continued to grow. After the conflict with the Ayyubids in 1172 and the relinquishment of the *baqt* treaty, Makuria faced new economic and military challenges. The fortifications of the capital city, not unlike those of other Makurian towns, were rebuilt and enlarged. New churches were also constructed on the northern fringes of the urban agglomeration.

The last stages of the drama were played out in the last quarter of the 13th century. King David's adventurous and unwise expedition on the Red Sea port of Aidhab and Aswan provoked Mamluk retribution. Sultan Baybars attacked and took Dongola in battle. Later, Egypt continued to meddle in Makurian affairs, backing various pretenders to the throne in Dongola. The main buildings of Dongola, the Cathedral and Cruciform Building, were destroyed at the turn of the 13th century, but the small churches remained in use. In 1317, the throne hall was turned into a mosque (see Kingdom of Dongola Town, pages 137ff.). The royal court abandoned Dongola in 1364, the rulers of Makuria being unable to cope with the desert tribes and losing to them the southern part of the kingdom all the way to Batn el-Hagar.

Even so, Dongola remained a center of importance. Over time new residential architecture mushroomed in the citadel area and the ruins of the Cathedral and Cruciform Building. It reflected a different tradition, presumably connected with ethnic and social changes occurring in Dongola in the 15th century (see pages 148ff.). Onto the 19th century, Dongola was the seat of a local ruler reigning over a small kingdom subject to the Funj sultans. The settlement shifted to the south and into the neighborhood of the Mosque, which continued to occupy the upper floor of the old royal palace. Characteristic *gubbas*, or tombs, of local saints appeared in the old cemeteries (see page 135). Economic reasons presumably forced the decision to abandon the site at the close of the 19th century, but the Mosque, which was falling into disrepair, was not removed from public use until 1969 when it was finally closed down, becoming an important historic monument instead.

Poster exhibition of Polish excavations in Dongola — beginnings of a site museum in El Ghaddar