

INTRODUCTION

There is no other place like Old Dongola in the Nile Valley. It is a rare example of a continuously lived environment from the 6th to the 19th century. 1300 years of cultural, economic, social and spiritual activities shaped this exceptional landscape, which is still evolving. This heritage landscape is of local, national and global significance. Nomination of the site for World Heritage status is currently under preparation. Among the three Nubian Medieval capitals, Old Dongola is the best-preserved site; the capital of the Kingdom of Nobadia, Faras, is lost under the dam reservoir (Lake Nubia), and the remains of the royal capital of Alwa, Soba (East), have considerably suffered due to the urban expansion of Khartoum. The unique character of Old Dongola is not limited to the ruins. It is not a dead city of ruins, but a very much living part of the life of a modern community.

The heart of the medieval capital lies behind the massive dark stone walls (the Citadel). The royal palace, churches and elite residences were built inside the fortifications, overlooking the Nile. The city expanded northward, encompassing grand churches, extensive residential quarters and an industrial area consisting of pottery kilns and iron-smelting furnaces. The Great Monastery of St Anthony, located 1.5 km northeast of the Citadel, stands in the outskirts of the city. The southernmost part of Old Dongola is the last inhabited area. Hila Dongola, the so-called “Abandoned Village” is the ancestral home of residents in Ghaddar,

Bokkibul and other villages in the vicinity. Some of the buildings are still owned by the descendants of the former residents. The Muslim cemetery is situated toward the east, stretching out over time into the south. Domed tombs (*qubba*) of Islamic holy men stand out in the landscape. The cemetery is still used as the final resting place for local residents and they also visit the *qibab* (plural of *qubba*) to practice ceremonies, to pay respect to the ancestors and for Islamic festivities.

The rise and fall of Dongola, the life of its inhabitants and its relations with the world outside the kingdom can be reconstructed from the material remains: outstanding artworks, sacral buildings, private houses, imported and locally produced objects, and rich historical sources. For the past 60 years archaeologists and historians have been investigating the history and development of this Makurian urban centre, but there is still much to be done to fully understand 1300 years of the political and social development. A large part of the 200 hectares (476.2 *feddan*) of the city is still buried under the ground – up to 12 metres of cultural layers in some places! It requires many years of investigations. The Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology at University of Warsaw runs the research and conservation project at the site together with the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM).

Archaeological results and local knowledge of the place are brought together in this book to give an overview of the life history of the city of Old Dongola from its establishment to the present. The local traditions and customs that are fast disappearing are also





The site plan with major historical features (Photo A. Chlebowski)

Old Dongola, once the capital of the Kingdom of Makuria (Photo A. Chlebowski)



introduced here, showing continuity as well as changes over the course of 1500 years at Old Dongola.

The first section gives an introduction to the communities' tie with the place, and the second section traces the socio-political history of Old Dongola. A summary of the first collaborative programmes between the communities and archaeologists can be found in the final section. In addition to the main text, there are some thematic boxes that provide in-depth information about the selected topics.

Safeguarding Old Dongola

Old Dongola is shared heritage. The site is registered on the National List of Scheduled Monuments of Sudan and legally protected under the Sudanese Ordinance for the Protection of Antiquities (1999). The National Corporation of Antiquities and Museums in Khartoum (NCAM) is responsible for the protection and management of the site. However, safeguarding heritage places is a responsibility of everyone: villagers living nearby, archaeologists, visitors, as well as the government. One way to help in protecting the site is to understand why it is important, what values it has for the local communities, the Sudanese and humankind.

Safeguarding is not only about the ruins at the site. Traditional knowledge, practice and customs in the surrounding communities are

Heritage has to be protected by everybody (Photo T. Fushiya)



disappearing. Some of them are directly related to the development of Old Dongola, making the place unique and significant. There is an urgency in passing on and documenting cultural and social practices in the local communities in order to ensure the future of this shared heritage.

Looting and illicit traffic of ancient objects are unfortunately a familiar story around archaeology and it is increasing at an alarming rate across Sudan in recent years. Acts of vandalism, looting, selling and buying can result in loss of important information and objects. They destroy the history and heritage of a country and of all humankind.