

OLD DONGOLA TODAY

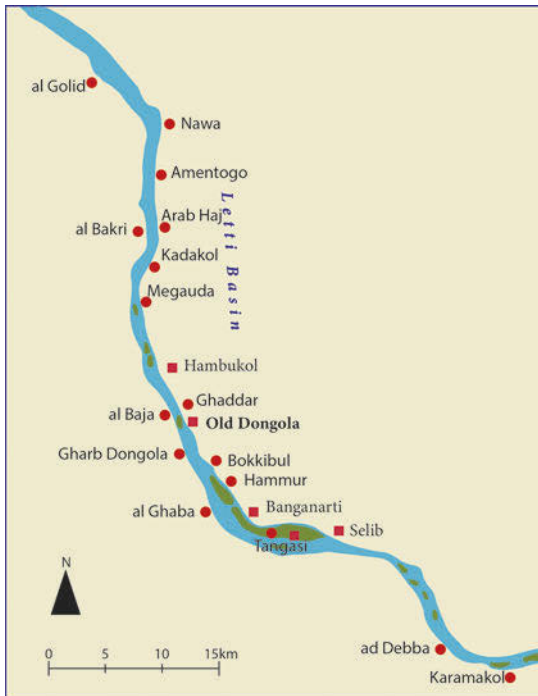
Located about 350 km north of Khartoum in the Northern State of the Republic of Sudan, Old Dongola (*Dongola al Ajuz* in Arabic) is one of the most important national heritage places in Sudan. Its historical and archaeological importance is well known, but it is also closely linked to the lifeways, traditions, customs, beliefs and ancestral ties of local residents in the vicinity.

Old Dongola is situated on the right bank of the river Nile, at the southern end of the Letti Basin. This area around the Debba bend is of strategic importance in the Middle Nile Valley, situated at the crossing of a desert route and the river valley where it is wide and joining a basin with fertile land. Today, the site adjoins modern villages, Ghaddar to the north and Bokkibul to the south. These villages maintain cultural practices, skills and knowledge that are associated with those that are found in the excavations at Old Dongola. Some residents of the villages are direct descendants of people who lived in Old Dongola.

Ghaddar is a local administrative centre of 10 villages (Old Dongola Unit), with government offices, a market (*souq*), a small hospital, a few *nadi* (community clubs), four primary and two secondary schools. Among about 2000 inhabitants in Ghaddar, there are the decedents of different Arab tribes and Nubians. Some of the Nubians

still speak Andaandi (a Nubian language). Bokkibul is a village named after an Andaandi Nubian word, *bokki-bu* (hidden). According to oral histories, it is a relatively new village, established in 1944 after the inhabitants of Hila Donogla (the latest inhabited residential area located in the southwestern part of Old Dongola) moved in. It is inhabited mostly by Arab tribes (Kababishi and Bedariya).

Today, the ruined city is mostly quiet, except for occasional visitors to the site and the local people attending funerals at the cemetery. No one lives at the site anymore. But the place is not totally isolated from the social and cultural life of modern local communities. The connection between the historic place and communities has not been lost. Rather, the spiritual and ancestral values are paramount.



The map around Old Dongola
(Map T. Fushiya)

After the fall of the Makurian kingdom, Old Dongola remained important as a regional centre (city-state) where many famous Islamic holy men (*fugara*, sheikh) were born, lived or travelled to and buried. The first contact of the Nubians with Islam dates to the time of the early Muslim conquest, when the Nubians signed a peace treaty with the Arabs after an inconclusive war in 651 CE (AH 31) and entered into an agreement on exchange of goods (*baqt*) which was implemented once a year. The relative peace lasted for more than 400 years to the Nubian kingdoms of Makuria and Alwa. There were some occasional hostilities between Egypt and Nubia – like the time that the Makurian King Kyriakos invaded Egypt with a huge army of camel and horse riders in the 8th century. Kyriakos reached as far as Cairo before the peace was brokered. The earliest known mosque in the Dongola Reach, between the Third and Fourth Cataracts, is said to have been built in the 14th century by Sheikh Ghullam Allah ibn Eid al Rikabi. The Sheikh is famous for his Islamic teaching; he opened a school of Islamic instruction, *khalwa*, in Old Dongola. However, this does not necessarily indicate the time when Islam first arrived in Nubia. The infiltration of the new religion was gradual and the oldest Muslim tombstones in northern Nubia and in the Khor Nubt in the Eastern Desert are as early as the 8th century CE (AH 2nd century).

Several buildings that are preserved in the site of Old Dongola are of particular importance for the local and Sudanese Muslim populations. The Mosque is among the most outstanding monuments. On sandstone outcrops, the two-story building immediately draws the attention of visitors to Old Dongola. It was the only building used continuously from its construction in the early 9th century until its closure in 1969, and is the oldest standing mosque in Sudan. The building was initially built as a church in the 9th century and was decorated with wall paintings. The first floor was converted into a mosque and used as a place of worship for Muslims until 1969.



Houses in the eastern part of Ghaddar, Jebel Ghaddar in the background
(Photo T. Fushiya)





Hila Dongola, so called “Abandoned Village” (Photo T. Fushiya)



The change of the use of the building reflects a major political shift in the region. By the mid-14th century, after decades of conflicts with the Egyptian Mamluks, the kingdom had weakened. In 1365, the Makurian king moved his royal court to a place called Daw, identified with today's Jebel Adda (Lower Nubia). Inscriptions on a stone plaque (a foundation stela), placed next to the *mihrab* in the first floor of the building, gives the date of the conversion of the building from a church to a mosque as 1317 (AH 717), witnessed by a certain Kanz al-Dawla (Treasurer of the State). It remained as a mosque until 1969, and the last Imam was Hussein Sati Mohamed.

After the building was turned into a mosque its interior was altered to house a new place of worship. The Christian wall paintings were not destroyed, but plastered over, presumably respect for the previous function. Sheikh Sati Mohammed b. Isa Suwar al-Dahab conducted a major restoration of the building in the late 18th century. His burial place is often visited by local people. His descendants succeeded in the role of *sheikh* of Old Dongola and still live in Ghaddar taking care of his tomb. Under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium administration, roofs were repaired a number of times between 1927 and 1955.

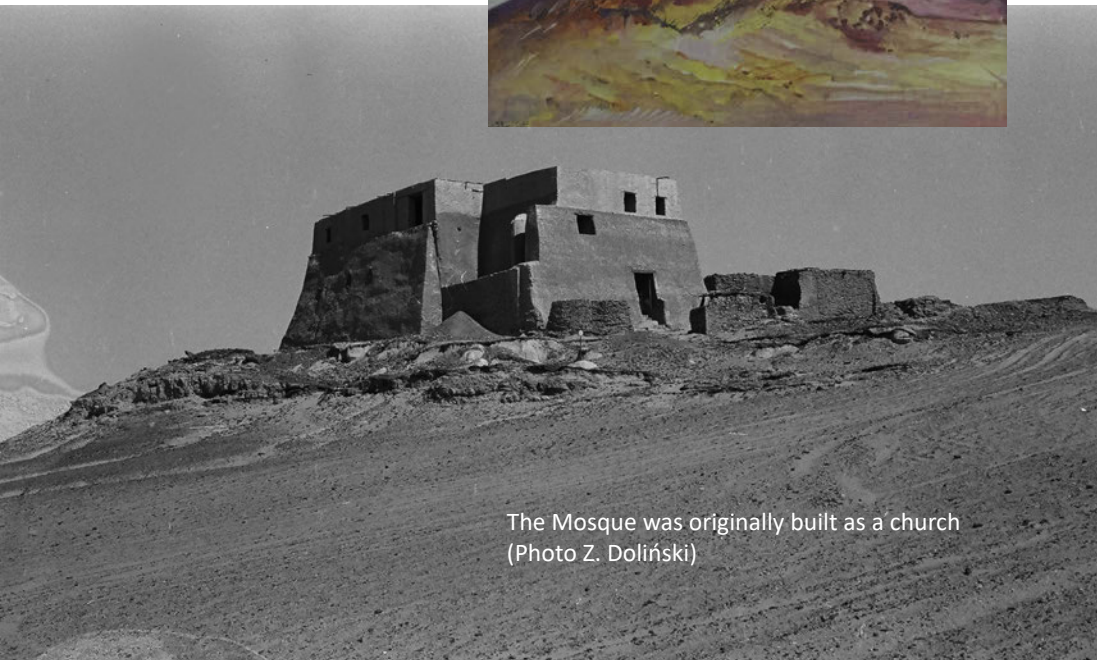
The residents of Ghaddar and Bokkibul return to the Mosque on the occasion of the *Salat al Eid*, the first prayer of the *Eid al Fitr* and *Eid al Adha*, and *Moulid al Nabi* – the Islamic festivities. The people gather at the base of the Mosque for the communal prayers. The building is a symbol of the local communities, a source of inspiration and pride as for retired teacher and artist, Sati Mohamed Ahmed.

There is no other place in the entire Nile Valley than Old Dongola that so many *qibab* are preserved in one place. Local oral histories speak of 99 *qibab* of *shuyukh* (plural of *sheikh*) who are locally respected as 'Dongola reformers'. Although Sufi shrines are

known in other parts of the Islamic world, the domed tomb is a distinct form of funerary architecture in the Middle Nile region. Normally, one or two *qubba* can be seen in the middle of a cemetery when passing through villages in northern Sudan. Thus, the story of the 99 *qibab* tells how important the cemetery of Old Dongola was. There are 19 *qibab* still standing today. They are a striking feature of Old Dongola.

This type of monumental tomb was constructed for an Islamic holy man (*sheikh, faqi*) who brought the knowledge of Islam, local spiritual leaders and Sufi masters. The *qibab* are known to belong to the ancestors of families still living in the area today. Local residents

A painting of the Mosque
gifted to the archaeological
team by the local artist
Sati Mohamed Ahmed



The Mosque was originally built as a church
(Photo Z. Doliński)



The renovation of the Mosque in 1907 and the names of workers are recorded on the stone slabs (Photo Z. Doliński)

visit their ancestral tombs – the men visit after the first prayer of the *Eid*, women in the second day – to pay respect and maintain a sanctified relationship with the holy men.

The sacred meaning of the *qubba* is also reflected in ritual practice. The tombs, for example those of Sheikh Suwar al-Dhahab, Sheikh Awuda al-Gaarih, and Sheikh Zyad, are ceremonially visited by the local people who come asking for blessing (*baraka*) over personal issues such as marriage, pregnancy, childbirth and healing of illness. Abeer Babiker describes a special ritual, called *nazer* or *zwarra*, that was passed on by the grandmothers in her family. After ablutions, the woman prays 10 times before visiting a *qubba*. Taking off her shoes, she enters the *qubba* and approaches the *sheikh's* grave which is covered with a green cloth. She takes some sand from under the cloth and rubs it on her neck (and her baby's neck, if the child is with her). She takes more sand

to share with family members at home and keep some for herself. When a wish comes true, she returns to the *qubba*. Thanking the sheikh, she says: "I will come to visit you and I will spread seeds for

your birds” and she spreads sorghum seeds over the grave of the sheikhs and then offers sweets to people she meets around the site.

The Muslim cemetery at Old Dongola is a place of burial for the local residents. It is especially important for the former residents of Hila Dongola (the so-called Abandoned Village), who live in Ghaddar, Bokkibul, Baja (across the river) and other nearby villages today. There are stories and personal wishes implying the importance of being buried in this cemetery, alongside ancestors and the famous sheikhs. It is the place of burial especially for members of families which have their ancestral *qubba* in Old Dongola. Even for people who have moved away, they wish to be buried in this particular cemetery. A local woman told the story of a sister of Babiker Khalifa. When she died, she was buried in Ghabah (a village across the Nile from Old Dongola). On one of the nights during the 14 days – the period when the family of the deceased visit the grave, the recently deceased woman appeared in a dream of a member of her family and said where they should come to visit her: “visit my grave in Old Dongola, don’t visit me in Ghabah”.

Apart from the ancestral and spiritual connections, the technology and skills that have been passed on from generation to generation in the local communities resemble those recorded among the finds, such as basketry, pottery, wooden utensils, from the Old Dongola excavations. The similarity has prompted ethnoarchaeological research (the study of current technology and knowledge to understand past materials) and more recently, it has led to a knowledge exchange between the local people and the archaeologists.

Although Old Dongola is no longer a regional political and economic centre, it has retained a role in the modern society and in relations with the people living around it. It is an important archaeological and local heritage site representing a cultural continuity.



The *qibab* are known to belong to the ancestors of families still living in the area today.





The *qibab* (domed tombs) in the Muslim cemetery at Old Dongola, the Mosque in the background (Photo T. Fushiya)



Basketry: a traditional handicraft

Basketry is one of the traditional skills passed on among women in this region. The weaving techniques observed in basket remains recently excavated from the 17th and 18th century houses at Old Dongola are similar to techniques still used today by the women of Ghaddar.

Busy with household tasks, farming and other jobs, women still find the time to make anything they need or would like to have from locally available materials. Plenty of doum palm (*Hyphaene thebaica*) and date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) grow in the villages around Old Dongola. In Ghaddar, women harvest the fresh and well-shaped fronds just outside their houses. The fronds are then dried in the sun and are ready to be used after 6–7 days. Two different palm tree species are used to produce a food dish cover (*tabaq*). Date palm fronds, which are softer and make thin strands, are wrapped with stronger and thicker doum palm fronds.

Dried palm fronds are woven into products of festive and ceremonial as well as everyday use. Typical basketry produced in the region include *tabaq* and mats (*birsh*) for family use or for sale at a local market (*souq*). Shape and colours differentiate the use. For instance, a long rectangular, colourful *birsh* is used at weddings, while a mat of the same shape but woven of uncoloured palm fronds is placed on top of the *angareib* (wooden bed) on which the body of the deceased is carried to the grave. When a *birsh* is large and rectangular shape and has a smaller rectangular piece attached, it is used as a prayer mat (*sajjada*). In addition to the traditional products, some women in Ghaddar use their skill and creativity to make handbags out of palm fronds. Working with the archaeologists to create a product for the tourist market, local women also start making smaller versions of the *tabaq* for easy packing in a suitcase.

Palm groves in Ghaddar (Photo T. Fushiya)



Gathering the most suitable palm fronds for basket-making
(Photo M. Reklajtis)

Coloured woven mat (*birsh*)
(Photo T. Fushiya)



Tabaq making (top)
and *birsh* making (right)
are the women's patient tasks
(Photo T. Fushiya)



Using a traditional skill,
Ghaddar women explore
new designs for different
use and easy transportation
(Photo T. Fushiya)



Traditional skills like basket-making are less appreciated in recent years – the local market being flooded with cheap, ready-made plastic products. Many young girls are no longer interested in learning the skill. Some women in Ghaddar re-evaluate the importance of various traditional skills and products when coping with the current challenging economic conditions. Raw materials are readily available, only a step away from home, often for free, to create household items, furniture and buildings. Traditional products are also eco-friendly, great examples of sustainable use of natural resources. Traditional knowledge and practice can be useful to think of our better future.

The significance of date palms as a source of nutrition and wealth, of symbolic meaning, knowledge, folktales and technology associated with the tree, has been recognised and added to the UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2019, as "Date palm, knowledge, skills, traditions and practices" of Sudan, along with Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

A place of *baraka* (blessing) – Fagir al-Moya

There are places in northern Sudan that are recognised for a significant spiritual role that they play in the lives of surrounding communities. These places are associated with holy men, angels, and *baraka* (blessing or divine grace) in the Sufi tradition. The sacredness of the places is often shaped by the spiritual practice of local communities. A *qubba* is one instance of a sacred place visited by local people to receive *baraka*. The local residents of Old Dongola frequent a place called the Fagir al-Moya which was believed to have a certain spiritual power, especially in curing health issues.

Fagir al-Moya is located near the site of Old Dongola, next to a ruined stone building that is said to be a place of prayer (*zawya*) and the groundwater comes close to the underground surface. Ghaddar residents used to come with a donkey and a pot, and remove surface soil to draw water from the ground. It used to be easy to take water, which was once right under the surface, but one has to dig about a meter down to reach the spring water in recent years.

According to a local legend, Fagir al-Moya is said to be a place where Moses fleeing the pharaoh crossed the Nile and struck a rock to bring water out of the ground... The legend is similar to the well-known biblical story. It may have been associated with the place in an effort to convince the local inhabitants of the sacred nature of the location.

Interestingly, there are other folktales from the region related to Moses (Musa in Arabic). The stories are known to the Nubian people – speakers of Nubian languages (Nobiin and Andaandi). For instance, a story from Abri (downstream from Old Dongola) tells that Moses was born in Sarkamatto, a village between Wadi Halfa and Abri. Abri is also believed to be the place where Moses crossed the river Nile. According to a linguist, Marcus Jaeger, it is believed among the

Andaandi speakers that the mother of Moses was Nubian and that Moses was born in Nubia. There is an island called Musaanarti (Island of Moses) north of (New) Dongola.



Fagir al-Moya is a place of *baraka* (blessing) near Old Dongola (the location indicated in green) (Photo T. Fushiya)

Find the bone! – a traditional game in Nubia

On the night of the full moon, people once spent time outdoors with their family, neighbours and friends. Before electricity mains were connected to the villages – which is not a long time ago – moonlit streets offered people an opportunity to visit one another in the evenings. They used to gather and sit together, holding long conversations over tea and sweets, children playing around. Memories of these enjoyable and relaxing times are often referred to as “the good old days” of Nubia.

Children had ways of enjoying themselves also on dark nights with a new moon. ‘Forest Protectors’ is a traditional game played in the region inhabited by the Andaandi speakers, including Old Dongola.



Local boys playing football (Photo M. Reklajtis)

Lions and wolves are believed to be the protectors of the forest. Ali Hassan Ali Qeili of Ghaddar described how it was played by children in the past. 'Imagine how wolf and lion cubs play with bones of animals hunted by their parents ...'

Children first go to look for a suitable white bone lying on the ground around their houses. They then divide themselves into two teams, '*koo n shiger* (lion of the forest)' and '*eddi n shiger* (wolf of the forest)', and choose a territory to protect. Each territory is supposedly protected by two big lions or wolves. The game starts when one of the players throws the bone out into the dark, away from the two territories, shouting '*koo n shiger, eddi n shiger!!!*' The boys on the two teams start running in search of the bone in the dark, calling out '*shilel feno?* (Where is the bone?)'. The one who finds it shouts '*shilel*' and tries to bring it back to his team's territory, while the other team tries to take the bone from him. The team wins when the bone is brought back successfully to their territory...

Many other traditional games are known in the local communities. However, football seems to be a more popular game today.

The 40th day at the Nile and a *qubba* – a local ritual practice

Having a new member of the family is an occasion to celebrate. In this part of Sudan, a mother and new-born are celebrated and protected with a series of customs and rituals taking place for 40 days after the day of birth. Abugassim Hassan told us about this.

Traditionally, a mother returns to her parents' house to give birth and stay afterwards for 40 days. The main entrance of the house is decorated with date palm fronds. Relatives, friends and neighbours visit them everyday. Women and children are allowed to greet the mother and meet the baby, while men are invited by the men of the house to the guestroom (*saloon*). Guests are welcomed with sweets, dates, fried wheat, *kusheig* (a type of seed), coffee and tea. The unending stream of guests has more to it than just celebration, because for the 40 days the mother and new-born are not supposed to be left alone. At least one lady must stay with them to prevent the mother from being scared by a *jiin* (spirit) and from other bad things happening.

Today, hospital birth is increasingly common in Sudan and safer delivery and healthcare is accessible in rural areas. In the past, a variety of objects and customs were prepared for the safety and health of a mother and new-born. The mother and baby had to stay in the same bed in the same room for 40 days after the child was born.

A thick wooden nail at the doorway of the room was struck in the ground. It was intended as a way of warding off evil spirits. Three protective items: the book of holy *Al Quran*, a sword and a special rosary (*Sibhat al yousry*: made mostly with black beads separated by some red, yellow, white, green beads and silver bead caps), were fixed



Women gather for different ceremonies of their neighbours and family – the image from a part of the wedding ceremony, *al Shaiyla* (Photo T. Fushiya)



Kusheig seeds on left (Photo: M.H. Siedahmed)



The river Nile (Photo T. Fushiya)

in the shape of a triangle on the wall by the wooden bed (*angareib*) that the woman gave birth in. Their purpose was to protect the bed where the mother and baby slept. A small sword or axe was placed under the bed together with seeds of dates and sorghum. The space under the bed was not cleaned until the fortieth day. Everyday, for 40 days, incense (*bakhour*) was burnt: *bakhour loban* in the morning, and *bakhor shaff* in the evening. *Bakhour loban* is made of *loban* (Benzoin) resin. Burnt over charcoal, the smoke is used for cleansing or to purify a room. *Bakhor shaff* is made of *talih* (*Acacia seyal*) wood which releases sweet fragrance. It is used by married women for *dokhan* (Sudanese smoke sauna) to soften their skin, and is especially important for relaxing the skin and muscles after giving birth.

A series of celebrations take place during the 40 days. On the third day after the birth, a young goat (*sikhaela*) is sacrificed on the occasion of a healthy birth (*slamat al-ragaba*). By this time the mother's health is considered no longer in danger. The eighth day is called *al-simaya*, the naming day. The *sheikh* of the village visits the baby in the early morning. First, he whispers the *Azaan* (Islamic call to prayer) in the right ear and then the *Iqama* (the second call to prayer) in the left ear of the baby, so that he/she remembers his/her name. Then the *sheikh* puts softened date and sugar in the baby's mouth so that he/she will be a nice person who speaks only about good things. A goat is slaughtered (two goats in the case of twins) and all the neighbours and friends are invited for breakfast.

The fortieth day after the birth is particularly important. On Day 39, the family starts preparing for the 40th Day celebration (*Youm al-arba'in*). Women from the village gather at the mother's house to bake pastries and *zalabya* (round Sudanese donuts) and attend the last shower (cleansing with water) of the mother and her child. In the afternoon of the 40th day, women and children gather at the house and start the procession to the river Nile. The Nile is

associated with a symbolic and spiritual meaning because it is where angels are believed to live. On the way to the river, the mother and baby make the first visit to a mosque to pray. At the riverbank, the mother first washes her face with the river water and then her baby's face. Old women throw sweets, sorghum, and wheat seeds into the Nile while they say prayers. It is believed the angels of the river Nile like these.

In Ghaddar, the group then proceeds from the Nile to the *qibab* in Old Dongola. They choose a *qubba* that is associated with their own family, or another one if none is directly associated. At the cemetery, the mother takes some sand from around the grave inside the family *qubba* and rub on the mother's neck and then the baby's while reciting special prayers. The women who join the procession also take the sand home for blessing. After the ceremony at the cemetery, the procession returns to the house of the mother and the ritual ends. From this moment the mother is no longer obliged to stay in the same room and the same bed.