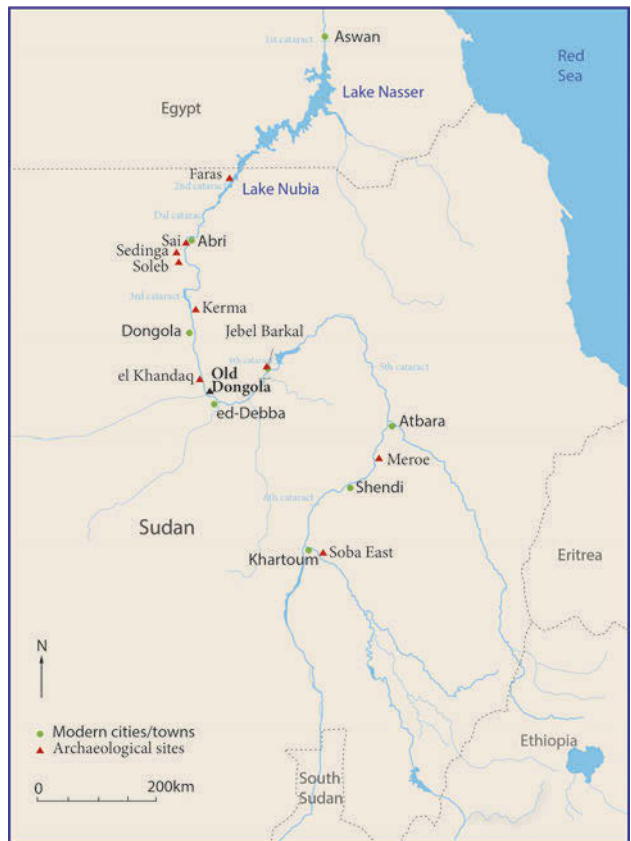


# THE HISTORY OF OLD DONGOLA

After the disintegration of the Meroitic dynasty of the Kingdom of Kush in the 4th century CE, small polities were formed across the Middle Nile Valley. Eventually, three rival centralised powers emerged: Nobadia with its centre in Faras controlling the northernmost part, between the First and the Second Cataracts; Makuria in the region between the Third and Fifth Cataracts with its seat in Dongola; and Alwa south of the Fifth Cataract centred in Soba. The cataracts are rocky rapids where the river is difficult to navigate, and have traditionally constituted political and cultural borders in the Nile Valley. By the mid 6th century all of the three kingdoms had been converted to Christianity.

## Foundation of the capital of the Kingdom of Makuria: 6th–9th century

Dongola (*Tungul* in Old Nubian, *Donqala* in Arabic, called today Old Dongola) was established as the capital of the Kingdom of Makuria around the beginning of the 6th century. By the 7th century, Makuria had merged with Nobadia, expanding its territory that covered 1,000,000 sq km (238,095,238 feddan) – the equivalent of the combined territory of France and Spain today. It was one of the largest states in the Middle Age.



Map of Sudan  
(Map T. Fushiya)

The capital of Makuria is located at the strategic point for trading and food production. It faces with the important trading point, where the caravan roads meet – one comes from the southwest, Kordofan, through Wadi Muqqadam and Wadi el Malik, and one comes along Wadi Howar, that links to Darfur in western Sudan. All desert routes meet together across the river from Old Dongola and go up north towards Asyut, Egypt. This desert route is known as the *Darb arba'in* (40-day route). The city is adjacent to the fertile Letti Basin in the Dongola Reach. The extensive cultivable land

in the Letti Basin supported the economy of the large kingdom. Generally, in the Middle Nile valley, arable land is limited to narrow strips on both banks of the river, except for some areas that some basins retain sufficient water in an extended area.

The construction of the city began with the fortification walls. The monumental city walls that surround a rocky plateau were originally 10 meters high and 5 meters thick, constructed of sandstone blocks and mud bricks, reinforced by several towers added along the walls. The stone fortifications enclosed the very heart of the kingdom, the seat of its rulers. Later walls built around the residential area on the citadel hill remained in use until the 17th century. In the citadel that occupied 4.5 hectares (10.8 feddan), administrative building, a royal palace complex, a royal church, and a commemorative building were located.

After the death of the Prophet Mohammed in 632 CE (AH 11), Arab forces started invasions outside of al Hijaz (today's Saudi Arabia) and clashed with the Byzantine and Persian empires. They controlled an area of the Levant (modern-day Jordan) and Egypt. However, the Nubian Kingdom withstood the two Arab invasions. When Amr ibn al-As attacked Nubia in 642 his troops suffered heavy casualties. According to the Arab historian, Ahmed al-Kufi, the Arabs had never suffered a loss like the one in Nubia. Abdallah ibn Saad Abi Sarh led the second attack to the Makurian territory. This invasion ended with a peace treaty and the *baqt* between the Makurian King Qalidurut and Egypt's governor, Abdallah ibn Saad Abi Sarh. The *baqt* was a commercial agreement specifying the goods and enslaved people that were exchanged between them. The treaty brought the peace to the Nubian kingdoms for more than 400 years.

The palace building was constructed at a location overlooking the Nile. It was made of red and mud bricks, and stone blocks. It consisted

The sturdy walls built as high  
as 10 metres  
(Photo T. Fushiya)



The fortification enclosed the  
heart of the capital of Makuria  
(Photo A. Chlebowski)



of storage rooms on the ground floor and residential spaces on the upper floor. The ground floor had a long corridor, vaulted rooms up to 4.5 meters high, lighted by large arched windows. In the 7th century, Makuria's conquest of its rival Nobadia gave it easy access to Egypt and opened the wider world for the Makurian kings. A large quantity of wine was brought from Egypt – which was part of the *baqt*, but locally produced amphorae that were excavated near the palace indicate that wine was also made in Dongola.

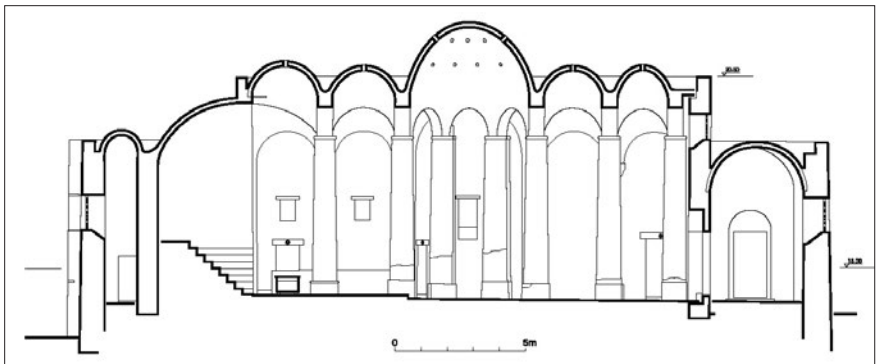
By the mid-6th century, the Nubian kings decided to convert to Christianity in order to be treated equal with other Christian rulers. Through contact with the Bishops of Alexandria, bishoprics were established in Makuria. Several churches were built (e.g. Old Church, Mosaic Church, Early Church, Church of the Granite Columns)

The royal palace was located inside the walls (Photo W. Godlewski)





outside the citadel. The architecture and wall paintings show strong Byzantine influence combined with Nubian culture, creating a unique artistic style. A large monastery was established at the northeastern edge of the city. Over the 700 years, at least a dozen churches were built in Old Dongola, some of them renovated or reconstructed in the course of the centuries.



The Church of the Granite Columns (Photo W. Jerke; drawing P.M. Gartkiewicz & M. Puskarski)



A royal church dedicated to Archangel Raphael was constructed next to the palace in the 9th century. Wall paintings and inscriptions in Greek and Old Nubian decorated it. The pigments used for the paintings are tangible proof of the king's wealth and the extensive trading network of the Makurian kingdom. Red lead was imported

A depiction of an Archangel in the Royal church uses exquisite imported pigments  
(Photo T. Fushiya)



The excavation gradually revealed the wall paintings in the church  
(Photo M. Rektajtis)





The granite steps and a carved stone in the Royal Church were brought from a Kushite temple elsewhere (Photo T. Fushiya)

from Spain and ultramarine, a blue pigment made of lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, worth its weight in gold. A raised platform in the nave for the priest to preach from was made of granite stone blocks brought from an unknown Kushite temple.

Houses were built inside and outside of the Citadel. House A.106, built in the mid-7th century, is a good example of a two-storey building (ground surface 10 m by 11.4 m), with four interconnected rooms on the ground



A fragment of a terracotta window grille from House A.106 (Photo W. Godlewski)



floor. A carved wooden beam was fitted in the entryway of one of the rooms and an upper-floor toilet connected to a holding tank was fitted into the corner of another room. The upper-floor room ceiling rested on a column with sandstone base. The walls were finely plastered and terracotta grilles decorated the upstairs windows.

## Heyday of the Makurian capital: the 9th to mid-11th centuries

Dongola flourished between the 9th and the mid 11th centuries. With extensive building projects of monumental architecture, the city became an important religious centre. Dongola's finest and most notable buildings were constructed during the joint reign of Zacharias and Georgios I (835–856), namely, the Cruciform Church and the Church (locally called '*kanisa*') that was later converted into a mosque.

The Cruciform Church was constructed outside the citadel in the 9th century. It was thought to be the largest church built in Nubia until a larger church was discovered in the citadel in 2021. The domed central court flanked with four porticos; the eastern part is elongated, accommodating a chapel built over crypts. The original structure was destroyed during the Mamluk invasion in 1286 and even though it was later reconstructed, it did not retain its importance.

The most striking building in Old Dongola was built in the reign of king Georgios (835–887). The church was constructed on the upper floor of a two-story edifice (12 m high) situated on a rocky outcrop. This rectangular monument (28 m by 18 m) underwent repeated alterations, renovations and reconstruction for over a thousand

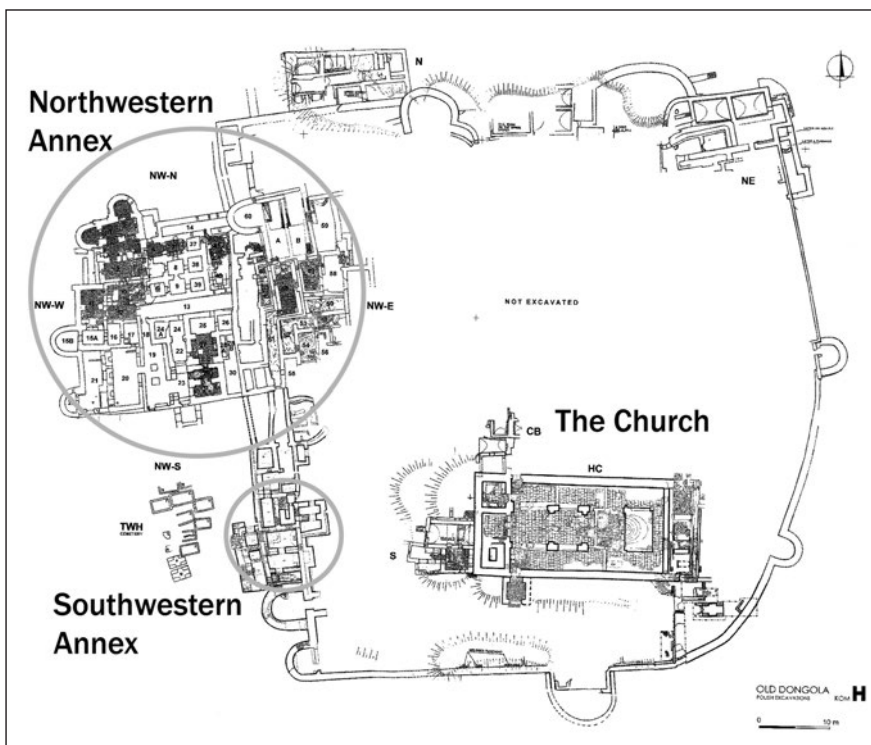
The reconstructed  
Cruciform Church  
(Image D. Zielińska  
& C. Calaforra-Rzepka)



years. Polish archaeologists have reconstructed the original plan based on their 13 years of documentation and excavation. The ground floor had a square hall in the centre, connected with two porticos, accessed by an eastern entrance. Another entrance on the west side was directly linked to a staircase leading up to the first floor. The walls of the staircase were decorated with polychrome paintings of a standing saint with a spear in hand and a warrior saint on a horse. The walls of the central room on the first floor were painted with images of the Nativity and of Mary holding the baby Christ reaching out to grasp dates from a palm tree in the company of royal figures. The latter representation is unique and is the only known representation of the scene in the world. It is interesting in view of the symbolic importance of the palm tree in the Middle Nile Valley from (at least) the Meroitic dynasty of the Kingdom of Kush when a palm frond was depicted in a ritualistic scene. Even today palm leaves are placed on graves during funerals

and used during festivities. The importance of the date palm tree in the local economy—the main cash crop, building material and furnishing—is still evident in local communities today.

The monastery complex was established on the eastern outskirts of the city by a bishop of Dongola in the 6th century and it continued to serve in this capacity until the 13th century. The large complex, enclosed by a wall, has yet to be fully excavated. So far, two churches, the hermitage of a monk called Anna, a Northwest Annex, a Southwest Annex, and a cemetery have been fully or



The plan of the Monastery complex  
(Plan M. Puskarski based on earlier documentation)

partly investigated, while the living quarters of the monks await excavation.

The monastery church is among the earliest architecture built in the complex soon after Christianity was introduced to Makuria. It was renovated in the mid-11th century, and used until the 14th century. Originally a basilica (a rectangular building with double pillars and semi-circular apse), it had a central tower supported on four pillars. In a chapel built over his cell at the western end of the church, a monk called Anna was venerated after his death. Saint Anna is the first Makurian saint known to us today.

The monastery complex underwent a major expansion in the 10th to 13th centuries. During the period, two annexes (the so-called Northwest annex and Southwest annex) were added to the west. These annexes were lavishly decorated with over 100 polychrome paintings, which are important sources for studying Christian Nubia and understanding the high quality of Nubian art. Although Byzantine and Egyptian influences are clear in the artistic technique and representations, the paintings show some unique Nubian iconographic inventions.

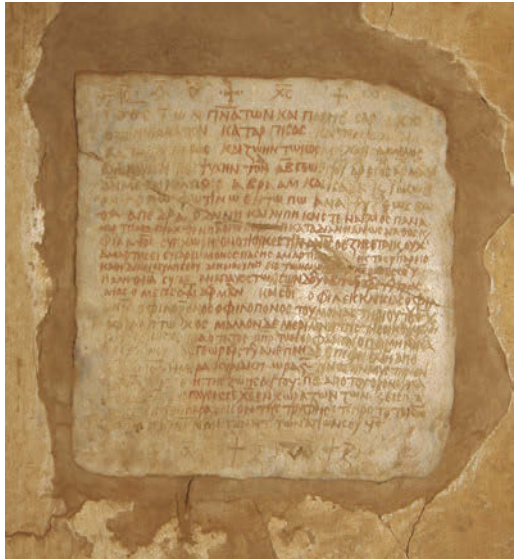
The Northwestern Annex was made up of several chapels, constructed over a few centuries. It had a commemorative function and became an important pilgrimage destination in Dongola. The annex houses a series of sacral spaces. The Archangel Michael, protector of people, seems to have been popular among the people of Medieval Nubia; his name appears frequently in inscriptions on walls, vessels, and amulets, and he was also venerated in one of the chapels in the annex. To the northwest of the church in the Annex, a chapel was constructed above a crypt where the archbishop Georgios was buried in 1113. A funerary stela commemorating the life and career of the archbishop was placed near the chapel.





Archangel Michael under the protection of the Holy Trinity,  
in a chapel of the Northwest Annex (Photo D. Zielińska)

The funerary stele of Bishop Georgios from the Northwest Annex of the Monastery is written in Greek.  
(Photo W. Godlewski)



Walls of the Crypt of Bishop Georgios covered with Greek and Coptic texts  
(Photo C. Calaforra-Rzepka)







Pilgrims may have visited the chapel of Georgios as well as two other commemorative chapels and crypts in the complex. Texts in Greek and Coptic—prayer of the Virgin Mary, text related to the death of Mary, gospels and apocryphal and magical texts—cover the walls of this crypt. The three crypts served as a burial place for 19 different individuals, interred over a span of 250 to 300 years.

The Southwest Annex located next to the West Gate of the monastery complex was built in the 10th or 11th century. The wall paintings preserved in this series of the building are exceptional. A particularly interesting painting shows a scene of dancers accompanied by several inscriptions in Old Nubian. In front of the Virgin Mary and Child, two groups of men appear to be dancing; one group wears masks decorated with cowry shells and loincloths with long tails, the other group has turbans, long trousers, skirts and shawls. The former group appears to be associated with a sub-Saharan culture, while the latter group appears to depict individuals from a part of Africa under Arab influence. Lines of inscriptions around the figures were probably to express the chanting or words spoken by the individual dancers. Based on the inscriptions, the scene is related to a fertility dance or a child-bearing ritual for a king's sister. Many other images in the Annex represent Mary and we learn from the inscriptions that women were among the donators of the paintings.



## Decline of the kingdom: late 12th to 14th centuries

The gradual decline of Makuria began in the 12th century. This was a period of significant socio-political transformation, although much of what we know relies on some written sources in Arabic. A series of raids and invasions by the Mamluks, especially under Baybars and Qalawun, led to repeated interventions to the royal court of Makuria in the 13th century. According to the historical records, 'puppet' kings were installed following Qalawun's campaign in Nubia in 1288, and King Simamun fled from Dongola. After the Mamluk army had left to the north, Simamun returned to Dongla and killed the 'puppet king' to re-establish the control. The Mamluks returned and the Makurian king fled again only to regain control after the Arab army had departed. During these conflicts, the city was destroyed and plundered. In 1311–1312, a Muslim member of the Makurian royal family, Abdallah Barshambu succeeded Simamun, although he was soon overthrown by the one with the Kanz al-Dawla title who saw the conversion of the Mosque-Church on the plateau into a mosque in 1317.

After a long struggle between the Makurians allied with the Banu Kanz tribe and the Banu Jaad, the Makurian royal court abandoned the capital in 1365 or 1366. The royal court was moved north, to a place called Daw (today's Jebel Adda) between Faras and Qasr Ibrim. This small Christian kingdom lasted for another 100 years or so, probably until the Ottoman invasion of Lower Nubia in the early 16th century.

## Development of a city-state at Old Dongola and the Funj Sultanate: the mid-14th to 17th century

In the 14th century, the two Nubian kingdoms, Makuria and Alwa, disintegrated into small polities within their territories; one of these was at Dongola. The collapse of the medieval kingdoms did not reduce the importance of the city. It remained a regional political and trade centre, known as the Kingdom of Dongola. It also developed as a notable hub of the teaching of Islam. Although the Muslim population was presumably growing in the city from the 14th century onwards, the mosque evidently co-existed with the churches which functioned until the end of the 14th century.

At the turn of the 16th century, Amara Dunqas who founded the Funj Sultanate defeated Alwa and extended control over the entire Middle Nile Valley. By the late 6th century, the Funj agreed with the Ottoman empire, which had replaced the Mamluks in Egypt in 1517, to set the border between them on the Third Cataract. Dongola came under the rule of the Funj sultans and effectively became a border zone between the two powers.

Evliya Çelebi (1611–1682), a Turkish traveller, described Dongola as a vibrant city with 650 houses in the Citadel and 3000 outside, attracting 1000 merchants. The vernacular architecture from this period had very different interior furnishings, house plan, building technique, and town planning than the Makurian city. The change in the domestic space and technique was probably due to the influx of people from different regions who established themselves in the city.

Çelebi also mentioned the residence of the *mekk* (ruler). A building stood in the northern part of the town located within the walls on the Citadel is thought to be this residence of the *mekk*, and

it was partly excavated in early 2020. The building is made of mud-bricks, walls were whitewashed and had three large rooms with a long narrow storage space at the back. It was much larger than other houses in the city. Interestingly, the deposits excavated near the residence indicate the presence of horses—



Dongola was once famous for horse breeding. The remarkable preservation of the houses in the town on the citadel gives insight into the everyday life and technology of the inhabitants of Dongola during the Funj period, which is the least explored part of Sudanese history.

The ongoing excavation of domestic architecture from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries  
(Photo M. Reklajtis)





The capital of Funj, Sinnar, grew to be an important trade centre in sub-Saharan Africa with a large number of traders settled in the city in the 17th century. Around this time, the Funj introduced the system of *qadi* (judge) who was selected from among the prominent Muslim families. In 1683/84 CE (AH 1095), *faqih* Mohamed ibn Isa was appointed as *qadi* by King Hassan walad



The building that was thought to be the residence of the *mekk* was excavated in early 2020 (Photos left M. Wyzgo; upper right M. Reklajtis) and the texts found in the building (Photos C. Calaforra-Rzepka)



Kushkush of Dongola. Through a marriage to one of the king's daughters, he was integrated into the local ruling family and the honorary title of Suwar al-Dhahab (Golden Bracelet) was bestowed upon him. The position of *qadi* was passed on to his son Hilali.

The influence of the Funj in the northern province was weakened in the 17th and 18th centuries. In the mid-17th century, the Shaiqiya tribe invaded and took control of the region between Deiga and the Fourth Cataract, installing a puppet king at Dongola. Finally, by the order of the Viceroy of Egypt, Mohamed Ali Pasha, his son Ismail conquered the Funj Sultanate in 1821. This marks the beginning of the modern colonial period and what we know today as the unified state of 'Sudan'.

## Last inhabitants of Old Dongola

Most of the inhabitants of Old Dongola left the city sometime between the 19th and early 20th centuries. How was this long-inhabited place finally abandoned? One of the reasons was the environmental conditions. The last inhabited area centred on a group of buildings located in the southernmost part of the site. Some residents of the nearby village, Ghaddar remembered that the reasons for leaving the village were the difficult access to water and the need for more living and farming space. *Jarf* land (the land on the riverbank) became smaller and did not ensure sufficient crop harvests. In the 19th century, a British official reported how the village was being engulfed by sand and sand dunes. Another record describes sand accumulated in streets being higher than the house floor.





Ruined house  
in the Abandoned  
village  
(Photo T. Fushiya)



*Jarf* land (the land on the riverbank) near the site (Photo T. Fushiya)





Since ancient times, farming along the Nile had relied on seasonal floods. Land in the lower part of the riverbank that is inundated by the seasonal flood is called *jarf* (or *seluka*) land and the flood water brings very fertile soils. Many crops could be grown on *jarf* lands without needing to use irrigation devices such as the *shadouf* (counterweighted lifting device) and *saqiya* (waterwheel) to feed in water. Some local people still cultivate small patches of *jarf* land near the site. Yet it had not been sufficient to support the large village population. The size of the population can be imagined from a local account. According to oral history, the villagers used to slaughter 40 cows for the meal on the last Friday of Ramadan.

Another constraint on life in the old village was that the village was registered as part of the Old Dongola archaeological site, so that it is under protection. It means that new construction and the use of modern building materials are restricted by the law. The last residents of Old Dongola left their belongings and furniture behind because it would bring bad luck to take them to the new houses. This is why much of the house furniture still remains in the old houses.