

WORKING TOGETHER FOR THE HERITAGE AT OLD DONGOLA

Archaeology was introduced in Sudan parallel to colonisation in the 19th century. Western archaeologists have long led major excavations, sending remarkable artworks and data outside of Sudan. Since independence in 1956, a growing number of Sudanese archaeologists have led their own projects and research, collaborated with international projects, and the department of archaeology at six universities has trained future Sudanese scholars. Even so, archaeology is still associated with *khwaja* (foreigners) in the Sudanese society, and, for some local people, archaeology is a reminder of exploitation and oppression during the colonial period.

Polish archaeologists have been investigating the history and development of Old Dongola since 1964. A relationship has been naturally forged over these 56 years, making many of the archaeologists feel part of the local community. Stefan Jakobielski, who headed the project for 40 years, is remembered among the residents of Ghaddar for presenting local schools with stationary, sharing medical supplies, and helping in various emergency situations. However, there has been some miscommunication and mistrust. Some rumours went around among the villagers that the Polish team discovered gold and treasures, but kept it secret from the local people and took them away, or that the archaeologists had tried to convert the locals to Christianity. The stabilisation work

at the Mosque/Church in 2015–2017 was misunderstood as an attempt to rebuild a church. The rumours were totally baseless for the archaeologists. Yet, the local people were not informed what the foreigners were doing and, with little or no communication, they were prone to scepticism. It is not surprising that they turned to such stories.

This sort of mistrust towards western archaeologists among local people is not uncommon in Sudan, in varying degrees from place to place. It is due in part to archaeology seen as a colonial practice, largely dominated by scholars from abroad and their interests for over 180 years. Contacts between the archaeological projects and local people are limited to work-related (mostly adult men working in the excavation). For a large part of the villagers, the foreigners are like an invisible neighbour who come from outside of their communities, and who hardly communicate with the villagers. Most villages around archaeological sites are close-knit communities valuing the neighbour relationships. In addition, it had not been common practice in Sudanese archaeology until recently to share the results of archaeological research with the immediate local communities. All that the local people witnessed was familiar places being excavated and objects and information were taken away from the locality—often never to be seen again.

To change this situation and to forge a wider, more trustful relationship with local people, a change of approach is necessary. As a starting-up project, the Old Dongola Dialog project was instigated in 2019. Centring on collaborative archaeology and community engagement, it investigates the relationship between the residents of Ghaddar and Bokkibul villages and the site of Old Dongola and archaeological practice to understand the local values of Old Dongola. Community engagement programmes have been designed to create opportunities for a wider part of the communities to meet



Teatime with the *rais* and his wife at the former project house in Ghaddar (Photo M. Rektajtis)



A heritage programme in cooperation with local schools was attended by members of the local tourism office and tourist police (Photo T. Fushiya)



44 teachers from the primary schools in Ghaddar joined the first meeting with the Polish team in 2019 (Photo T. Fushiya)



The project director, Artur Obluski, visits a primary school in Ghaddar and talks with the students (Photo T. Fushiya)



The Old Dongola *Nafeer* (Photo M. Rektajtis)



A new school network programme for Sudanese and Polish students began in 2020 (Photo M. Reklajtis)



A meeting with a group of men from Ghaddar (Photo M. Reklajtis)



Interviews with the elders, teachers and women are an important way to learn about the community's perspective and knowledge (Photo T. Fushiya)



with the archaeologists and to share in the results of research, research together about the past of Old Dongola.

The interaction goes beyond the aims of a conventional archaeological project. A joint committee of Polish specialists and local representatives was formed to discuss a Heritage and Development Plan. For participatory and sustainable development planning, the committee has also begun discussions with other stakeholders at national, regional and local levels, aimed at identifying interests and needs. These include the local tourism office and tourist police, both with an interest and strongly supportive of this new cooperation.

The project has just started. Long-term commitment on both sides is essential for a fruitful collaboration that will eventually change how archaeology is practiced in Sudan for the past 180



Ghaddar students visit the excavation (Photo M. Rektajtis)

years. There have already been positive impacts. Over 1000 local people gathered for an Open Day with the archaeologists at the site in 2019. Some community programmes were well received and initiated more conversations. The cooperation with four primary schools in Ghaddar raised awareness among pupils regarding their local heritage and archaeology. Archaeologists are happy to see the local people are interested in their work, although the overwhelming number of people wandering among the fragile remains has become a new concern.

This is the first book in a series that records and promotes cultural heritage of Old Dongola through archaeological and local knowledge. More will be forthcoming as a result of the collaboration between the archaeologists and the local people of Ghaddar, Bokkibul and beyond. The local communities have expressed many expectations concerning this project. Indeed, it is a learning opportunity for both sides and we are open to suggestions what the next volumes in this heritage book series should be about. We are interested in people's ideas and opinions and hope that their involvement and contributions will help to advance local collaborative avenues of investigations and engagement.

Discovering Old Dongola

“The workshop was interesting. I enjoyed it. I wish it continues and we discover more about the Old Dongola site”.

“I wish everybody who hasn’t visited Old Dongola to visit and protect its antiquities”.

“We met the archaeologists and we visited the church and the mosque at Old Dongola”.

These are some of the comments made by local school children. Groups of students from four primary schools in Ghaddar joined the Poster Workshop organised by the PCMA project. Students first visited the site in groups with a camera recording what they learned and found interesting during their visit. They learned about the site, the archaeological excavation and the latest research. Back in the classroom, they were asked to create a poster that would explain and promote Old Dongola to guests visiting in their communities. They used the information they had learned and the photos that they had taken.

In the final part of the workshop, the students presented their posters to the heads of the Education office, the Tourism office, the Tourist Police, and the Polish project, headmasters, teachers, students and their parents. In the second year, a local TV programme featured the workshop and the wonderful creations of the students.



Poster workshops for local students in cooperation with primary schools in Ghaddar (Photo T. Fushiya)





Investigating the past in collaboration

Archaeology is not the only way to learn about the past. The lived experiences and collective memories of local communities are an important source of knowledge, equal to the information coming from archaeological research.



A discussion and knowledge exchange about the excavated objects between local men and archaeologists
(Photo M. Rektajtis)



The current excavation is focused on the development of the city around the time of the political shift to the Muslim rule from the 14th century onward. The careful excavation has reached layers from the 16th to the 18th centuries, uncovering houses constructed in the wattle-and-daub technique, implying the presence of new groups of people and new technologies. However, many other household features are familiar to local residents (including students!).

Local communities have the knowledge and skills related to local heritage. The elders are familiar with objects that were used by their grandparents in everyday life or the younger generations have heard from them in stories. They could identify and give names of these objects in Arabic and Andaandi Nubian.

For the first time in 2020 archaeologists met with some of the local residents in Old Dongola to discuss some of the objects excavated at Old Dongola. This opportunity to integrate local knowledge with archaeological expertise proved to be an important learning experience for the archaeologists. As for the local residents, they were empowered by the fact that their knowledge could contribute to research on their history.