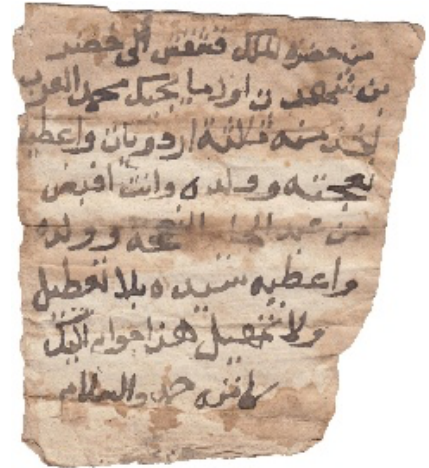




Discovery from Old Dongola Confirms the Existence of a Legendary Ruler

A recently published article by three researchers from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw, presents new historical evidence from Old Dongola—the former capital of the Christian Kingdom of Makuria—dating to the period of Sudan’s Islamisation. An Arabic document discovered during archaeological excavations confirms the existence of a ruler who had previously been regarded as a semi-legendary figure.

The article, published in the journal *Azania*, is among the first outcomes of research on the Arabic documents uncovered at Old Dongola, currently studied by Tomasz Barański, an Arabist at PCMA UW. Numerous texts—such as letters, administrative and legal documents, as well as amulets—provide valuable insight into the past of this city located in the Middle Nile Valley and allow the silent ruins uncovered by archaeologists to almost literally “speak”.



As Tomasz Barański explains: “The written order issued by King Qasqash proves the historical existence of this figure, previously known only from brief references in a hagiographic work dating to the early nineteenth century.” Although the content of the letter itself may appear relatively mundane, it offers a unique glimpse into the socio-economic relations of the Kingdom of Dongola during a period of intensive Arabisation and Islamisation, particularly into the relationship between the king and his subjects. “We may suspect,” Barański continues, “that Qasqash and his court skilfully managed the distribution of material goods—and, consequently, social prestige—within the traditional system of royal patronage. This document provides only a small but valuable piece of evidence for that process.”

One of the most important conclusions drawn from the discovery is that Arabic was already being used by scribes serving the successors of Makuria at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It remains unclear, however, whether Arabic had already become widely spoken at the royal court in Dongola, not to mention among communities located further from the centre of power, which almost certainly continued to use a local variety of the Nubian language in everyday communication. This observation is significant for further research into the scope and pace of the processes of Islamisation and the formation of Arab identity in Sudan.



The manuscript was written on paper and has survived intact to the present day, unlike many other documents that have been preserved only in fragments, making them difficult to interpret. “Its language and the scribe’s calligraphic skills indicate a somewhat imperfect scribal practice. The use of non-standard grammatical forms and the rather unsophisticated hand should not be surprising, particularly in an environment where Arabic had not yet become a native language,” the researcher notes. “Moreover, the irregular shape of the sheet of paper on which the order was written suggests that this text may have been only a draft of the actual document,” Barański adds.



The order issued by King Qasqash was found in a large residential building where, alongside artefacts attesting to the elite character of the structure—such as cotton, linen, and silk textiles, as well as objects made of ivory and rhinoceros horn—more than twenty Arabic documents were also discovered. Among them was the order issued in the name of King Qasqash, found—as is often the case with archaeologically valuable discoveries—in refuse layers. Interestingly, the building is still referred to by local residents as the “King’s House”. The discovery of this document in this particular location provides another argument supporting the local identification of these ruins, preserved to this day through oral tradition.

As emphasised by Artur Obłuski, Associate Professor at the University of Warsaw and head of the ERC project *Urban Metamorphosis of the Community of a Medieval African Capital City* (UMMA), within which the 2021 research was conducted, the PCMA UW archaeological team works closely with the inhabitants of Dongola and the surrounding area. “They are our partners in this research. We learn from each other and exchange knowledge. This is how we know that King Qasqash still appears in legends preserved in local memory. Interestingly, his descendants continue to live in the Dongola region to this day.”

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- T. Barański, A. Obłuski & M. Wyżgoł, The King of Nubia at work: archaeological context and text edition of a sixteenth/seventeenth-century Arabic document from Old Dongola, *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* (2026). DOI: [10.1080/0067270x.2026.2615518](https://doi.org/10.1080/0067270x.2026.2615518)
- Read more about PCMA UW's research at [Old Dongola](#)
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Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw (PCMA UW) coordinates Polish archaeological research in the Eastern Mediterranean since 1959 (since 1990 under the present name). In recent years, it broadened its scope of interest into the Arabian Peninsula and the Caucasus. Currently about 20 projects are ongoing in [Egypt](#), [Sudan](#), [Tunisia](#), [Morocco](#), [Cyprus](#), [Lebanon](#), [Kuwait](#), [Oman](#), [Georgia](#) and [Armenia](#). The PCMA UW also runs Research Centres in Egypt, Sudan, Cyprus and Georgia.

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