

SONIYAT

SOUTHERN DONGOLA REACH SURVEY ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECONNAISSANCE NEAR ABKOR 1997

Bogdan Żurawski

In February 1997, a brief archaeological reconnaissance was conducted on the right bank of the Nile in the environs of Abkor, opposite Ed-Debba (Map Sheet 45-E). The survey was a prelude to the Southern Dongola Reach Survey which is scheduled to start fieldwork in January 1998.¹

The area had been visited by several travelers who left brief descriptions.² The 1997 reconnaissance trip was organized following written authorization from the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums. The fieldwork conducted on February 9-16, 1997, included:

- surveying of the area covered by dunes southeast of the Estabel fortress, where in 1991 the sandstone relics of a hitherto unknown building resembling the Napatan temple were shown to the author by the Howawir Beduins;
- brushing the topmost parts of the walls of the ruined structure;

¹ The Southern Dongola Reach Survey has been organised jointly by the Research Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of Warsaw University, Archaeological Museum in Poznań, and the Faculty of Mediterranean Archaeology of the Jagiellonian University. The NCAM has offered a survey concession on the right bank of the Nile between Old Dongola in the north and the right bank of Khor El-Mahfour, a few kilometers downstream from Ez-Zuma, in the south.

The team consisted of: Dr. Bogdan Żurawski, Dr. Mahmoud El-Tayeb, Mr. Zbigniew Borcowski, Mr. Kazimierz Kotlewski.

² Most important of these early descriptions was a narrative by a Turkish traveler, Evliya Celebi (who journeyed through the Sudan in 1672/1673) who mentioned that the Abkor fortress stood on the river bank. Today the Abkor Fortress is a couple of kilometers away from the river, cf. Linant de Bellefonds, *Journal d'un voyage a Meroe dans les années 1821 et 1822*. Khartoum 1958, p. 36 n. 3.

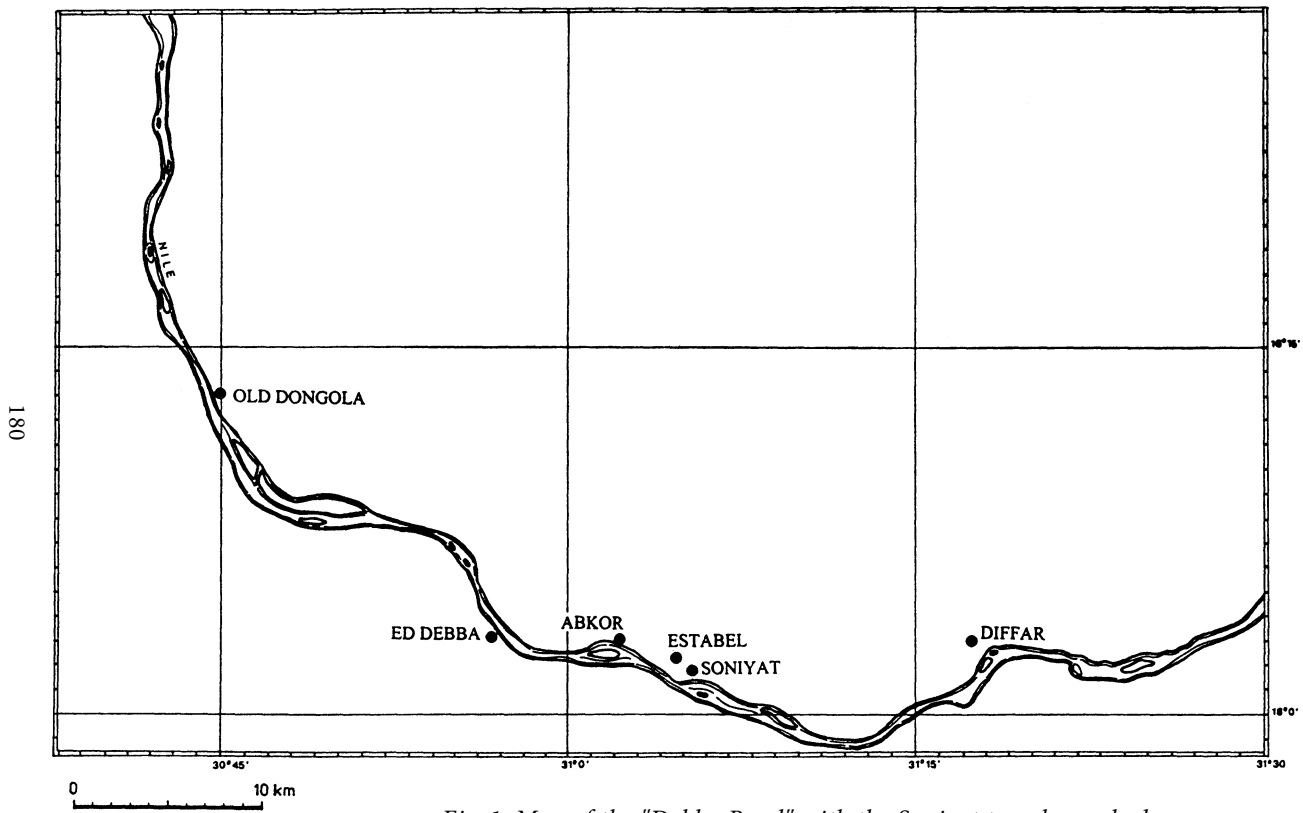


Fig. 1. Map of the "Debba Bend" with the Soniyat temple marked.



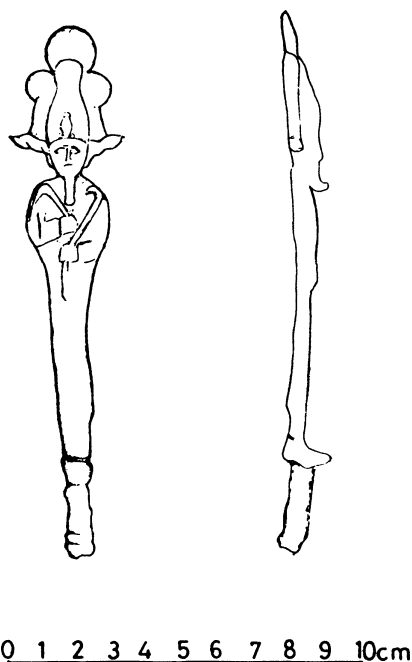
Fig. 2. Votive deposit from the cache. Photo K. Kotlewski.

- drawing a master plan of the building;
- digging a trial pit in the southeastern corner in order to estimate the overall length of the building;
- taking vertical and oblique aerial photographs by means of a camera suspended on a kite, both before and after the documentation activities.

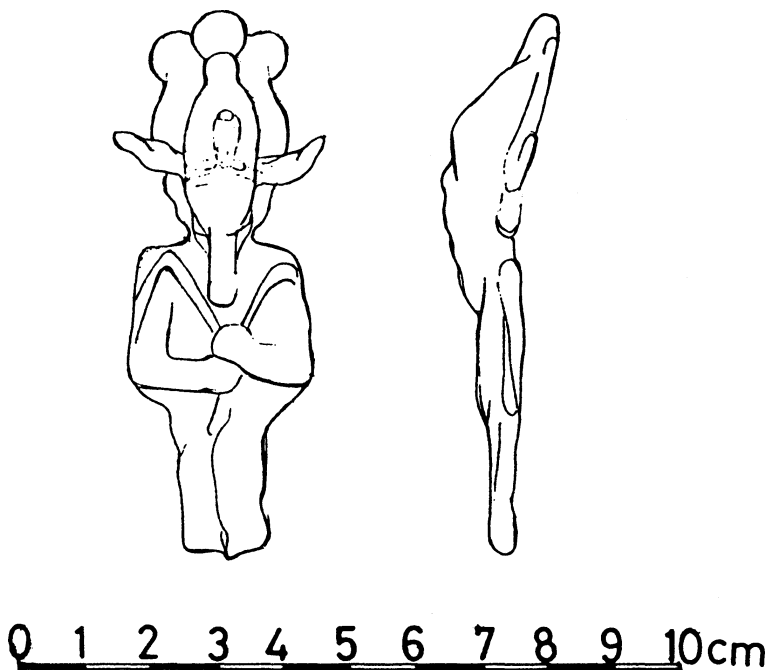
When visited in 1991, the building in question was almost completely covered by sand dunes. The Bedouins mentioned reliefs on some of the walls, but failed to show the precise location. The building, particularly its northern part, has been partly uncovered in consequence of a local entrepreneur having started a small irrigation project in the vicinity (inflicting much damage on the southernmost part of the structure).

In consequence of the work carried out in 1997, it has been proved beyond doubt that the building in question is a cult edifice closely resembling in plan and execution the earliest phase of Temple B500 at Gebel Barkal, as well as the Ramesside chapel B508-11 and Temple B300 in Napata (Dr. Derek Welsby, personal communication). It also recalls the Egyptian temple in Amada. The general workmanship (dovetails, large size of sandstone blocks used, etc.) resembles the Horus Temple from Buhen. The use of lime mortar as a bonding material and the overall dimensions of the structure are other points of similarity. The manner of construction, with large blocks measuring 120 x 60 x 30 cm bonded with dove-tailed cramps, is paralleled both in Pharaonic and Napatan contexts.

The tripartite sanctuary, two side corridors, vestibule and hypostyle hall set the building apart from the temples at Tabo, Kawa and Contra-Napata (Sanaam Abu Dom), so it is presumably not one of the structures commissioned by Taharqa. The Meroitic dating of this temple should be excluded, because plenty of Meroitic hieroglyphs and graffiti have been found scratched on the upper surfaces of the bases, apparently after the columns had been overturned.



*Fig. 3a. Bronze Osiris figure.
Complete, H. 14.9 cm.
Drawing B. Żurawski.*



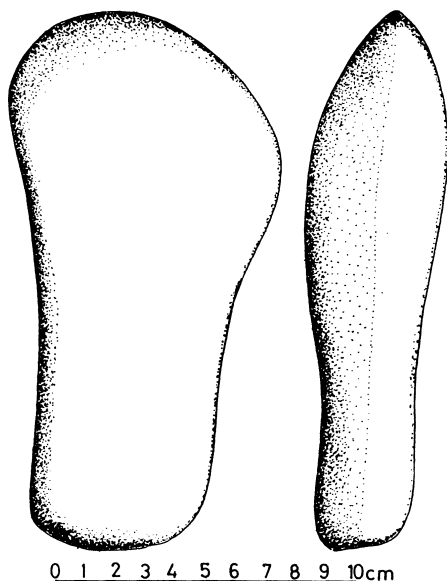
*Fig. 3b. Copper Osiris figure. Broken. H. 8 cm.
Drawing B. Żurawski.*

The geographical position of the temple, as fixed by GPS, is 18°01'96"15 N; 31°05'99"62 E. The ruins lie near the hamlet known locally as Soniyat (which means in Nubian Arabic "plenty of sandstone blocks"). The name Soniyat is not marked on the 45-E map sheet. The temple is 18.35 m wide, and its presumable length is 27.89 m, although it might have originally extended southwards. It is constructed of finely worked sandstone blocks measuring 112 x 56 x 30 cm on average; some larger blocks measuring up to 200 cm in length have also been

found. The blocks were carefully leveled and bonded with a thin layer of a very hard lime plaster. Additionally, the most vulnerable blocks, especially in the corner sections and in the lowermost courses were interlocked using wedge-shaped (dovetail) joints.

The quarries where the building material used in the temple construction was quarried were located in the isolated sandstone outcrops following a line heading north-west from the Estabel Fortress (marked on Map Sheet 45-E). Traces of ancient quarrying methods have been found there together with Christian monograms scratched on the cliffs. A presumable anchorite (?) grotto was installed in a cave in the quarries.

The temple stands on an alluvial plain covered by aeolian sand. Originally, the temple's main entrance looked to the Nile



*Fig. 4. Polished quartzite celt (?).
1. 18 cm, W.(max) 9 cm. Th.
(max.) 4.5 cm.
Drawing B. Żurawski.*

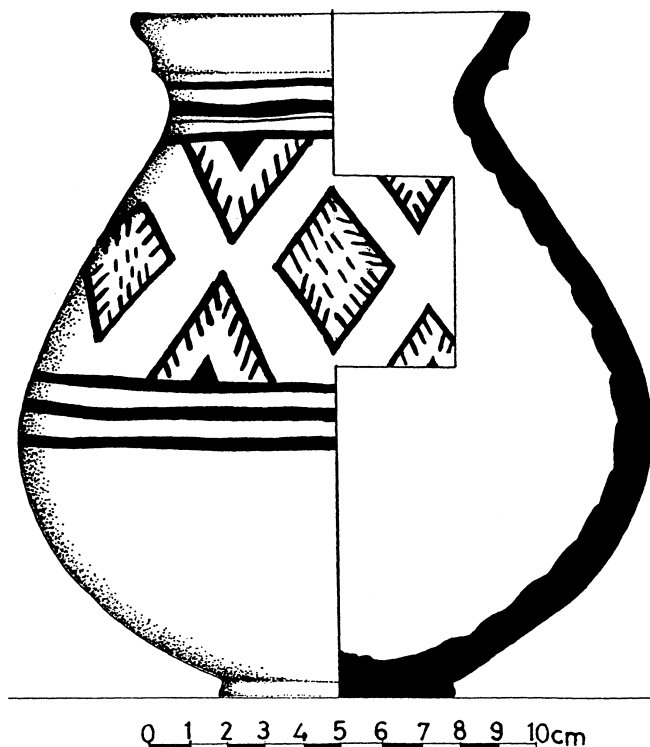


Fig. 5. Pottery jar. Late Christian Orange ware. Decorated with diamond-shaped motifs. H. 17.7 cm, dia (max.) 16.5 cm, dia (neck) 8 cm. Drawing B. Żurawski.

which flowed nearby. The alluvial terrain descends southwards, that is, to the river.

The surviving relics of the internal division of the northern part of the temple clearly indicate a three-aisled sanctuary of perfectly symmetrical design flanked by two corridors. The sanctuary was preceded by a transversal vestibule entered through a jambed entrance set in the middle of the southern wall.

The side corridors were also provided with jambed entrances. There is a small chamber accessed through a jambed passageway in the southeastern wall of the central sanctuary chamber. No attempts have been made to locate the temenos wall or any other structures outside the temple.

No traces of inner or outer plastering were found, but there are traces of floor plastering. All the above-ground blocks are badly eroded due to wind action. The colonnaded portico in the southern part of the temple is preserved only in its lowest foundation courses. Large-scale excavations are needed to reconstruct the original plan of this part of the temple. The four column bases, of which three have been already exposed, and one was unearthed in 1997, have an average diameter of 70 cm.

The corners of the temple were rounded to form engaged columns. The layout of the temple is perfectly recognizable in its northern part. Almost all the architecturally important elements can be seen on the surface. Two circular sockets, drilled apparently in order to accommodate the timber legs of an altar, were found in the northern part of the central nave of the sanctuary.

The southern extent of the walls is highly conjectural in the plan. However, the existence of the outer Southwestern wall, perpendicular to the outer Southeastern wall of the temple, is suggested by a huge corner(?) block that was cleared in 1997.

The remarkable state of preservation of the foundation courses of the northern part of the temple stands in contrast to the dilapidated southern end which resembles on the master plan a courtyard with some rearranged blocks in the middle. This isolated formation of reused blocks (the dovetailed blocks were put without their counterparts) could be what remains of a church which was probably accommodated in the southern part of the temple.

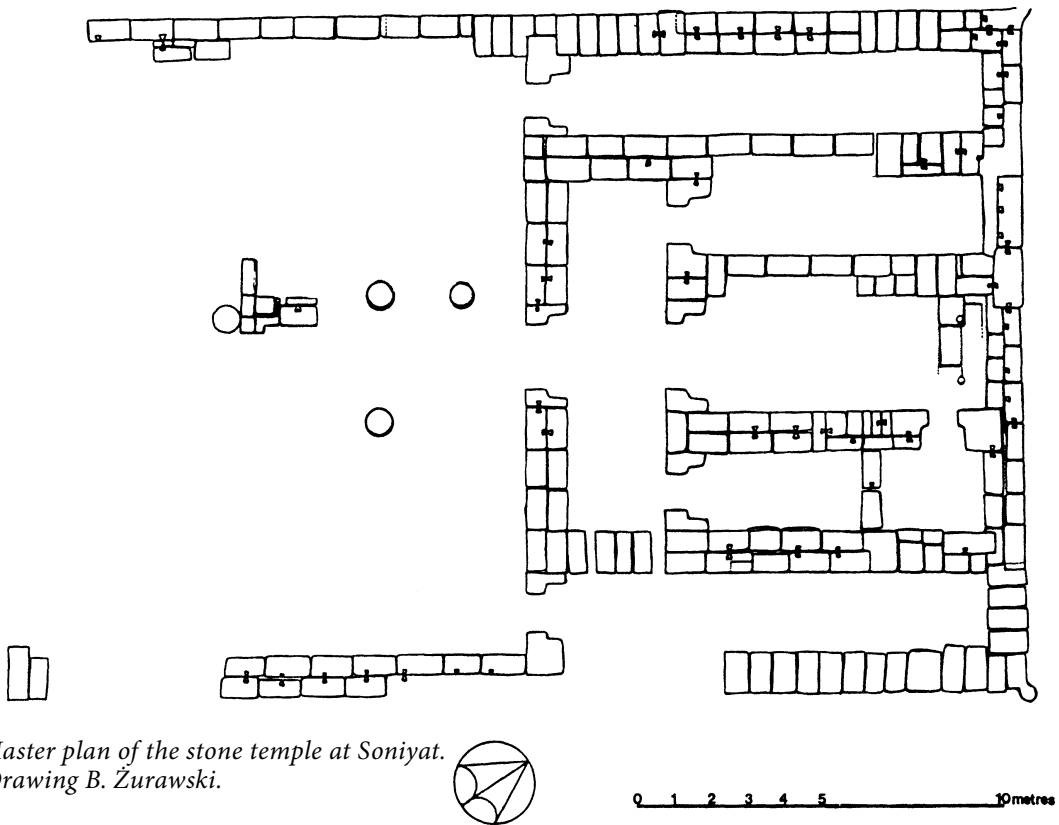


Fig. 6. Master plan of the stone temple at Soniyat.
Drawing B. Żurawski.



Fig. 7. Temple at Soniyat in February 1991. Photo B. Żurawski

The most puzzling discovery came by accident when the tops of walls were being brushed clean in preparation for taking aerial photographs. A cache was discovered in the southern wall of the vestibule, near the eastern jamb of the passageway connecting the vestibule with the hypostyle(?) hall. In the uppermost layer of the fill, a collection of natural pebbles, ochre nodules and ferruginous rock was found. The stones were concealed beneath a thin layer of sand. They were all natural, but of very bizarre shapes. It was obvious that such heavy stones could not have been brought there by rainwater or wind.

At the bottom of the cache, two copper figurines representing Osiris (with crossed whip and scepter and an atef crown) and a polished stone celt were found. This deposit of definitely votive character, put in clear aeolian sand, was devoid of any archaeological context. Possibly, the stones and artifacts were re-located by somebody who kept them out of sight in the cache, which had been marked by a huge overturned block lying nearby.

Explaining this extraordinary find is difficult. The stones resemble "rain stones" used in rain magic by the Nilotic peoples of the Southern Sudan. In Reisner's records and diary kept in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (kindly checked and communicated to the author by Dr. Timothy Kendall) there are notes recording a similar deposit found associated with Temple B700 at Gebel Barkal. On February 22, 1916, Reisner noted that these objects came not from the Napatan temple, but from a cache immediately west of the temple in one of the four trial trenches he was digging, called a', b', c', d'. The cache was found in d', which was nearest the cliff and probably about 5-10 m to the left of the left corner of the B700 pylon, looking at it.³ What is most interesting in Reisner's diary is a suggestion made on February 28: "*In trench*

³ T. Kendall, personal communication.

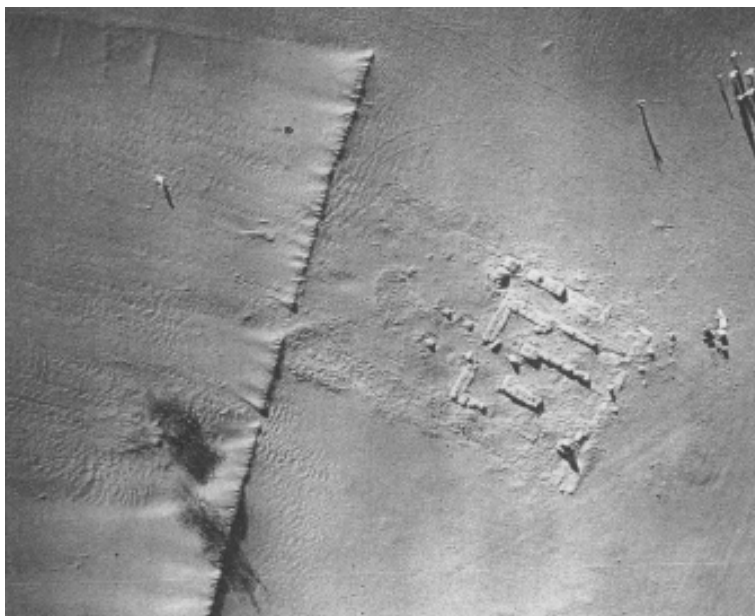
d' (Bldg 700) a well defined wall is now partly clear. Its direction is 56 degrees W of N. The direction of Bldg. 700 taken on columns and wall running into rock varies from 41 degrees to 43 degrees W or N (...) In other words, the wall in d' seems to be older than 700 - perhaps contemporary with 500." (quote kindly provided by Dr. Timothy Kendall). Since the layout of B500 (Amun Temple) at Barkal bears a striking resemblance to our building, Reisner's hint makes the early dating of the Soniyat temple more reasonable.

Votive deposits consisting of oddly shaped natural stones are also found in Napata, Mirgissa and in El-Kurru. The deposits found so far seem to be restricted to Egyptian and early Kushite contexts. In the tomb of Khensa, a wife to Piye, at El Kurru (Ku.4, early 7th century BC), a remarkable collection of natural and artificial spherical stones was found.⁴ Some of these oddly-shaped natural flint pebbles "*must have had specific significance for Khensa because one of the multi-noded stones is wrapped in gold wire, and because the natural double-noded form of these pebbles has been reproduced several times artificially by a carver in a strange banded stone.*"⁵

About 100 m to the north of the northeastern corner of the Soniyat temple two sandstone blocks protrude from the flat alluvium covered by a layer of sand mixed with stones. They sit perfectly parallel to each other some 8 m apart. The eastern block is 354 cm long and 110 cm wide. The western one, of the same width, is shorter (272 cm). The geographical orientation of the long axes of the blocks in question is the same as that of the temple. It does not seem to be accidental; they can be the surviving parts of another, significantly bigger temple at Soniyat.

⁴ T. Kendall, *Kush. Lost Kingdom of the Nile*, Brockton, Massachusetts 1982, p. 20-28, fig. 25 a-f.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 28.



*Fig. 8. Temple at Soniyat. Vertical air photograph of the site.
Photo B. Żurawski.*

Just at the close of the survey, a Late Christian jar was brought by a Soniyat villager named Djadu Ali Ahmed. The jar (Fig. 5) was said to have been exposed by winds on the outer perimeter of a Christian kom, a hundred meters away from the temple. The jar was registered as a find and taken to the NCAM in Khartoum.

The discovery of the Soniyat temple (or temples) weakens the arguments in favor of the theory that the Egyptians and the Kushites controlled the Nile Valley well into the Northern Dongola Reach and occupied Napata but not the area in between. It definitely proves that the confluence of the Wadi el-Melik and the Nile was densely populated at least in the

Kushite period and that major urban centers, as well as religious ones, were located there. That the right bank of the Debba bend was occupied in Napatan and New Kingdom times was already suggested by the discovery of some robbed graves a couple of kilometers east of Argi (west of the *gubba* of Wad Idris).⁶ The objects from these graves are registered in the Sudan National Museum (no. 5123).

⁶ A.J. Arkell, *Varia Sudanica*, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 36 (1950), pp. 35-36.