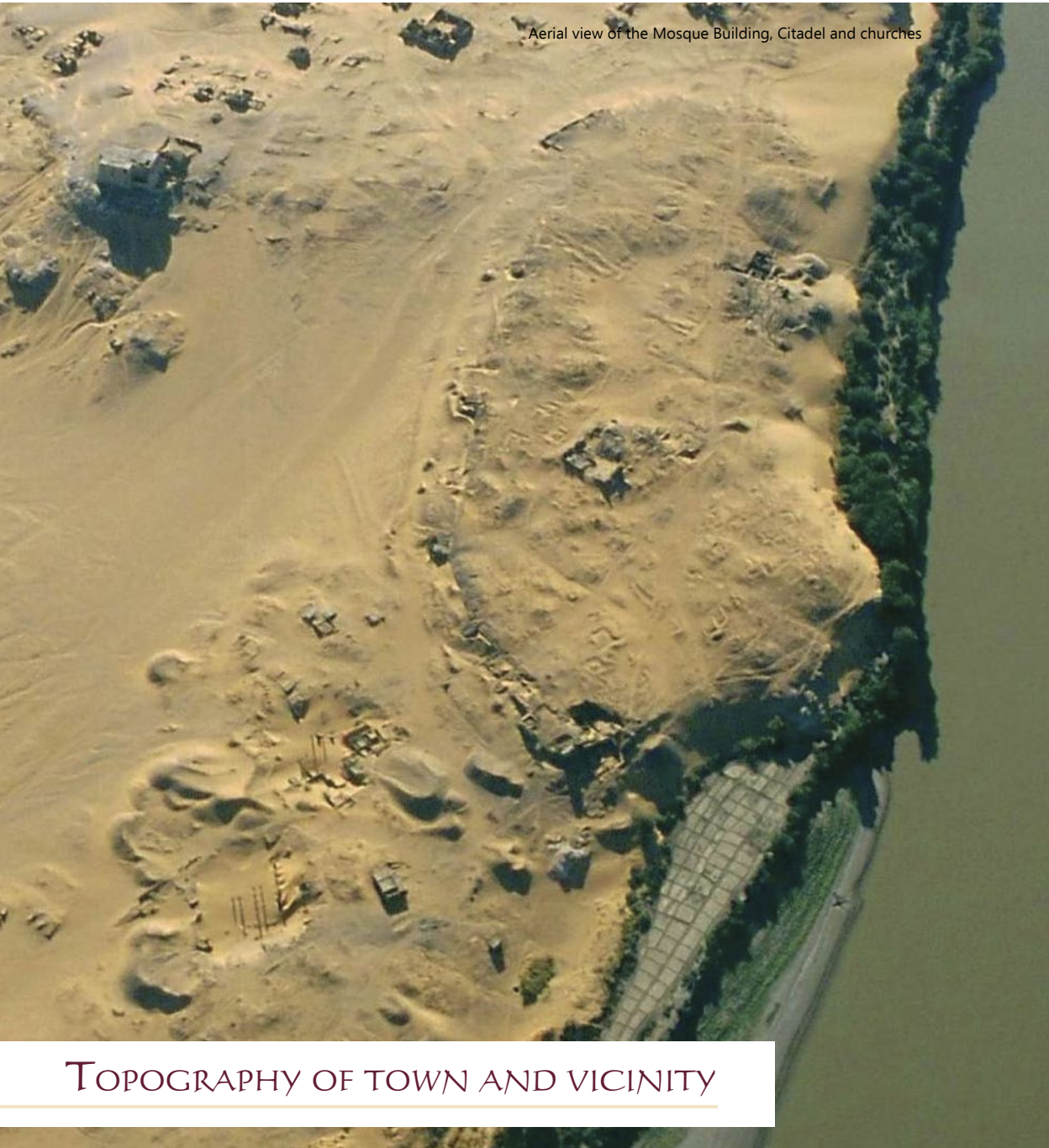


Aerial view of the Mosque Building, Citadel and churches

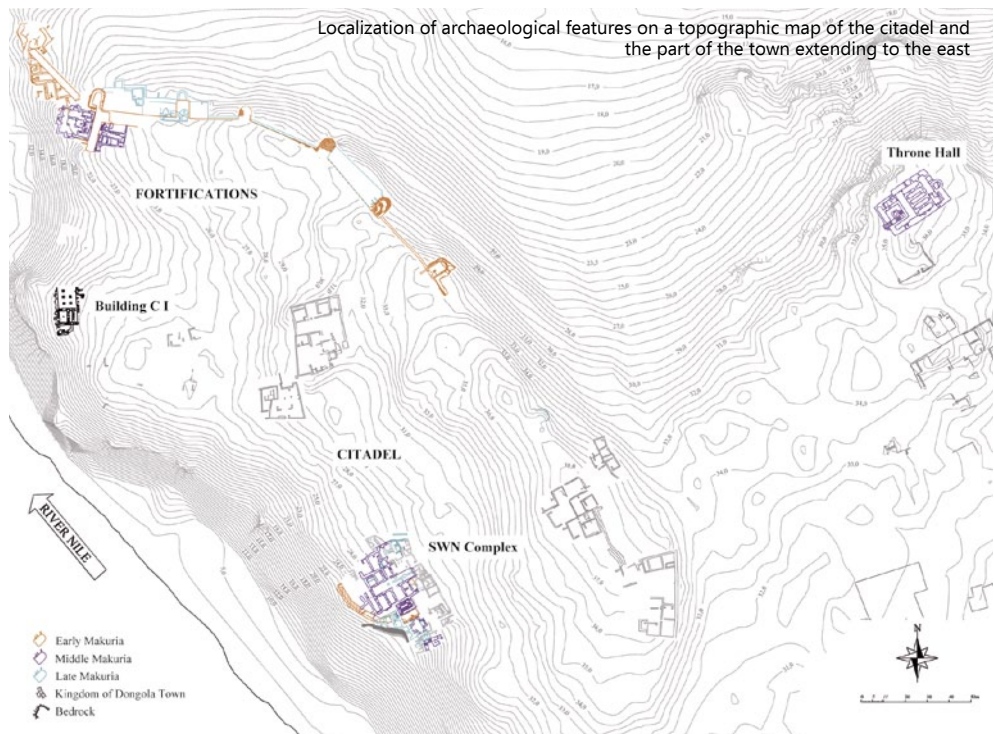


## TOPOGRAPHY OF TOWN AND VICINITY

Dongola experienced its heyday upon becoming the main center of the Kingdom of Makuria in the early medieval period. The first step was building a citadel on an apparently uninhabited rocky plateau rising steeply above the Nile on the east bank of the river. This is believed to have taken place at the close of the 5th century and before the kings of Makuria adopted Christianity. The choice of place for the royal court was dictated by the needs of a developing kingdom. The seat of power had to be moved from the vicinity of Kushite Napata to a central position in the Kingdom of Makuria, away from the great religious complexes of the Kushite period (Godlewski 2006; 2013b). There is no doubt that the decision was as much strategic as political, the current trends in defensive architecture of the time requiring towns to be fortified in order to ensure the new rulers proper economic and political security.

A Meroitic tradition, as represented by the walled Royal City in Meroe, may have stood behind these new ideas, or perhaps it was the more contemporary fortified town at Merowe Sheriq (Godlewski 2007). It seems, however, that Roman military architecture adapted to local reality, as at Merowe Sheriq already in the 5th century, was the key source of inspiration.

The economic and social resources of Dongola were concentrated in the regions immediately to the north and south of the town. The Letti Basin began just 2 km to the north of the Citadel. Like the Kerma and Napata Basins, it was one of the extensive regions of agricultural, horticultural and industrial activities found in the Nile Valley between the Third and Fourth Cataracts and it most certainly supplied the economic needs of the capital town of Makuria. Settlement in the area has not been sufficiently recognized

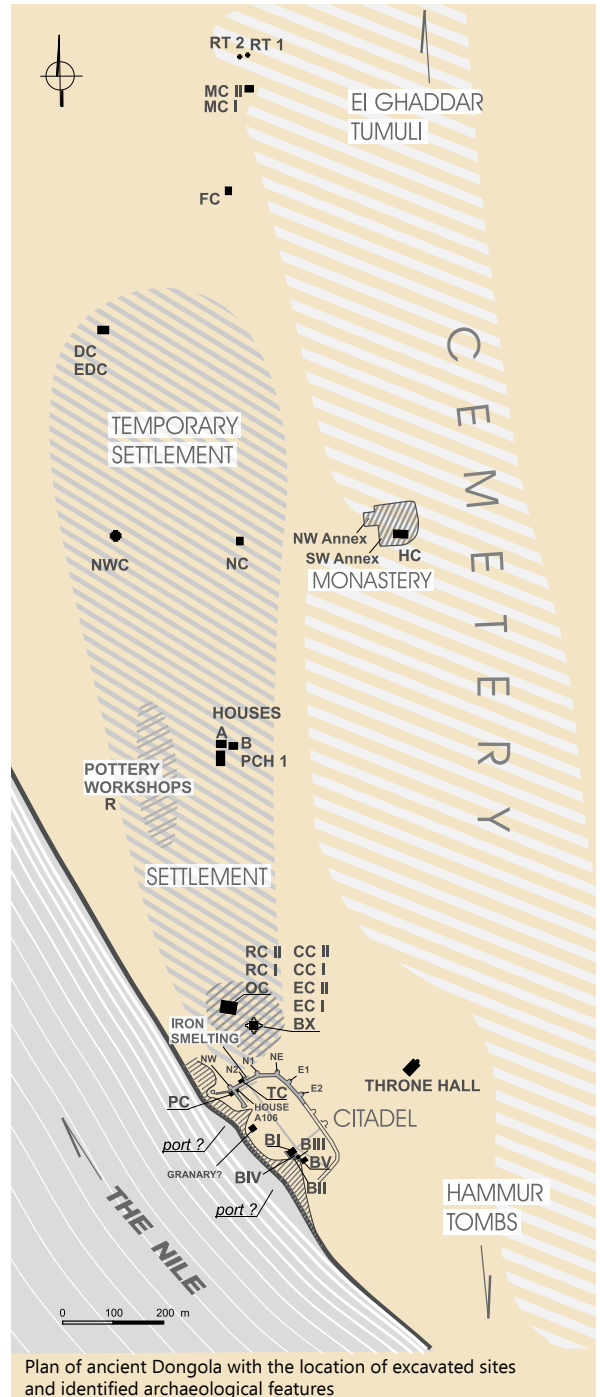


as yet, but the extensive tumulus cemetery near Gebel Ghaddar, spreading east of the modern agglomeration of El Ghaddar, is telling proof of the size and affluence of the population of the Letti Basin in the 4th through 6th centuries AD. The evidence is not enough, however, to suggest that the Basin was among the more important centers of Early Makuria in the 5th century (Grzyski 1987; El-Tayeb 2012; Godlewski, Kociankowska-Bożek 2010).

The tumulus cemetery at Hammur, situated some 8 km to the south of the Citadel in Dongola, includes some more elaborate tombs that can be attributed to the Early Makurian elite (El-Tayeb 2003). These tombs of the second half of the 5th century closely resemble the funerary monuments of Zuma and Tanqasi, considered the most important burial grounds of Early Makuria (El-Tayeb 2005; Godlewski 2008; Shinnie 1954). Whether the necropolis at Hammur is actually witness to an important center of power in Early Makuria cannot be determined at the present stage of research. No trace of a settlement has been recorded anywhere in the vicinity. The region was surely Dongola's hinterland to the south.

In economic terms, the large islands on the Nile from Tangasi upriver to the Letti Basin downriver were also of substantial importance. Constantly formed and modified by the waters of the Nile, they were mostly flooded at high water, hence impractical for permanent settlement. Fertile soil and unlimited water supply made them excellent, however, for cultivating gardens and fields.

Once the Citadel was established on the Dongola Rock, Gebel Ghaddar cemetery became the capital's official burial ground, as suggested by two rock-cut tombs, interpreted as royal burials, and the extension of the cemetery to the south in Middle and Late Makurian times. The oldest Christian tombs identified in preliminary investigations were found to occupy the northern end of the burial ground, near the tumulus cemetery (Żurawski 1997a).



Plan of ancient Dongola with the location of excavated sites and identified archaeological features

The agglomeration developed as population increased, responding also to internal and external political events. On one hand, there were the needs of the royal court and church hierarchy, on the other, events like the siege laid to the town by the Arabs, the signing of the *baqt* treaty, conflict with the Ayyubids and termination of the *baqt* in the end of the 12th, destruction by the Mamluks, retreat from the town of the royal court, the establishment of a local Kingdom of Dongola and its gradual Islamization after the middle of the 14th century.

The first period in the city's existence, from the 6th through the 12th century, saw dynamic northward development in the direction of the Letti Basin. A religious complex sprang up just north of the Citadel, around the successive buildings of the Cathedral and the most important sacral structure of the kingdom, the Cruciform Church dedicated to Jesus (CC). The main monastery of the town, established on the desert fringes presumably already at the close of the 6th century, developed unhindered throughout this time. Nearer to the river, an extensive district of pottery workshops operated from the middle of the 6th century onward, and further inland, a residential district spread northward, in the direction of the Letti Basin. Freestanding churches were founded ever further north, e.g., Northwest Church (NWC), North Church (NC), Church D (DC), as well as Church F (FC). Being built of brick, these churches may be presumed to mark the extent of the Dongolan suburbs, the town itself being composed of less permanent architecture constructed of reeds, wood and mats. Mas'ud of Aleppo, who was sent as an envoy to Makuria in 1175, may have been referring to this part of the town, when he wrote: "Dongola has no brick-built houses, except the royal residence; all the rest consists of houses built of reeds" (Vantini 1975: OSN 370).

The cemeteries of the town were located in the desert on the eastern fringes of the town, extending from the tumulus burial ground in the north, the area around the Great Monastery to the wadi in the south that ran at the foot of the rock, on which the Throne Hall of the Kings of Makuria (turned into a mosque in 1317) was built.

The other direction in which the capital town developed was to the south of the Citadel. The settlement of Old Dongola, presumably established in the 17th century was located here, until its abandonment in the late 19th century. Explorations have been sporadic here, hence little can be said of the actual patterns of development. There was apparently little interest in the area during the heyday of the town, from the 6th through the 13th century. Freestanding church structures should be expected here (Wiewióra 2003: 501–502), as well as presumably impermanent architecture. The southward expansion of the town took on importance in the times of the Kingdom of the Town of Dongola, especially after the houses raised in the ruins of the great churches and the citadel complex were abandoned sometime in the 17th century, although such a dating cannot be more than intuitive at least for now. There are no good dating criteria for the archaeological material from this period. It is likely that the habitational district south of the Citadel and the long southern wall surrounding the southern plateau on the south and east were erected at this time, the defenses intended as protection for the inhabitants as well as their livestock against plundering. The entire agglomeration shifted south, concentrating around the Mosque which was located on the upper floor of the ancient Throne Room. The citadel was abandoned. The picturesque *qubbas* of the period were gathered in the southernmost part of the town cemeteries, to the east of the long wall.