

THRONE HALL



Mosque Building, view from the northwest

The Mosque in Dongola can be seen from afar, especially from the direction of the Nile. It stands 12 m high on a rocky outcrop rising steeply from the desert at the edge of an extensive plateau east and south of the citadel, where the medieval town ruins are concentrated. Its massive silhouette at first glance recalls Pharaonic structures and seems more like a defensive building. Travelers have long described this large rectangular structure, 28 m by 18 m, as the only building in Dongola to have remained in use, even if with short breaks, from the times of Middle Makuria in mid-9th century until very recently.

Its history of destruction and rebuilding has resulted in considerable alterations of the interior on both floors and a virtual obliteration of any external traces of the original structure. The ground floor chambers are filled with layers of rubble up to 1.50 m thick. Interior windows have been enlarged to act as entrances. Walls and vaults are cracked and damaged. The coating that was meant to reinforce the structure on the outside, introduced presumably in the 13th and 14th century, has effectively concealed all architectural detail. Nonetheless, research carried out since 1971 has contributed a partial reconstruction of the original plan of the ground and first floors, and has identified the function of this structure (Godlewski 1982; Godlewski, Medeksza 1987).

Building materials included mud brick (35 x 18 x 8 cm), red brick (32 x 16 x 7 cm) and occasionally blocks of sandstone as corner and entrance reinforcements. Outer and inner walls were equally massive, reaching about 1.10 m in thickness, and were founded either directly on rocky ground or on ruins of older structures. Red brick was used for the wall facing on the outside and for window and door arches, in keeping with the principles of Meroitic building tradition which called for more durable material to be used in such spots.

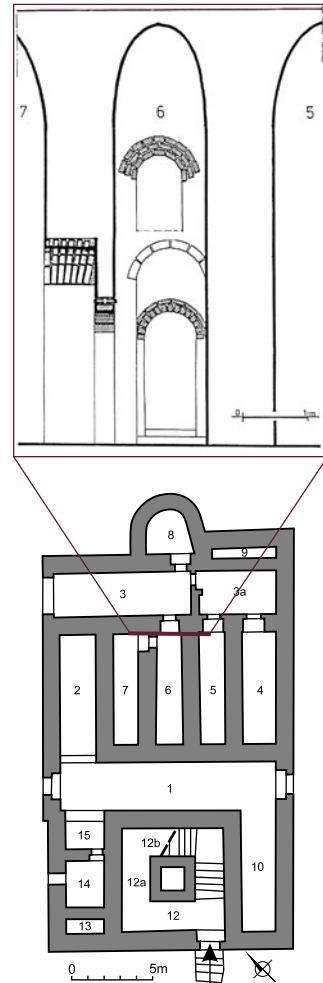
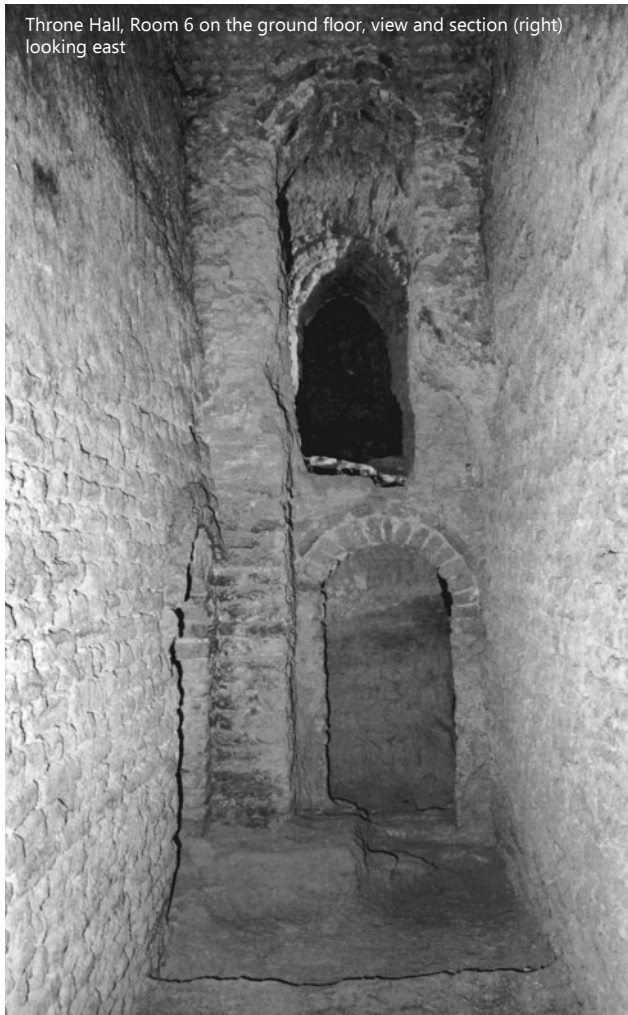
The original building consisted of a ground floor that was cut off from the rest of the premises and an upper floor reached via a monumental staircase, which also led presumably to a terrace roof. Two entrances from the north led to long passages that organized the circulation on the ground floor. Two independent sets of chambers were accessed from the passages. The rooms in the center (Nos 4–7) could be reached from the northern passage with an entrance from the west, while the other small units on this floor (Nos 2, 10, 14–15) from a southern corridor with entrances at the opposite ends. All the rooms were narrow, from 1.60 m to 3 m, and very high, up to 6.50 m, with barrel vaulting. The interior was lighted through several rounded-arch windows. The extraordinary height of the ground floor is understood when one considers that it was the upper floor that was the important part of the building and the objective was to raise it as much as possible above the ground.

This upper floor was reached via a monumental staircase entered from the west, which was the approach from the city and river. Official delegations and processions making their way to the hall on the upper floor and the roof terrace could have followed no other way. The reveals in the entrance were built of sandstone blocks. The jambs and the construction of the transom and relieving arch have survived. The original entrance was 2.75 m high and 1.25 m wide.

The western facade of the staircase had two large rectangular windows opening onto the city and lighting the interior. The walls of the staircase were decorated with murals on two successive coatings of plaster. Probes carried out on a small-scale on the second and third platform of the staircase permitted the nature of these murals to be identified. In both cases, the frescoes on the second coating of plaster featured warrior saints. The one on the second platform of the staircase was a standing saint holding a spear in his raised right hand. The holding of the

spear, aimed at whatever was depicted at the saint's feet, is typical of warriors. Traces of yellow wings with red peacock feathers on both sides of the head suggested an identification with the Archangel Michael (Martens-Czarnecka 2001: 281). The mural observed on the second platform features a warrior saint on horseback. It, too, was painted over an older painting of a warrior saint, depicted most probably in standing position. Again, the condition of the earlier painting precludes its full interpretation.

The second floor of the building was strictly symmetrical in design. The central and most important hall is a square (7.00 m by 6.90 m) and is surrounded by a corridor running around it. One entrance led straight from the staircase, two others from opposite sides of the surrounding corridor, from the north and south. Four granite columns and corresponding pilasters in the walls supported a wooden coffered ceiling. Several ceiling beams of this construction have been preserved in original position in the south-



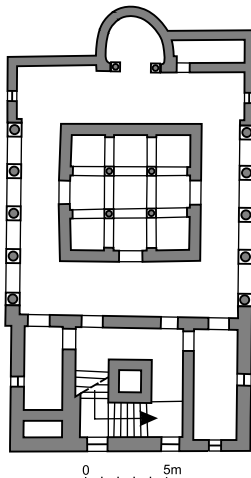
Throne Hall, ground floor

western quarter of the hall and one beam in the northwestern quarter. It is very likely that the roof took on the form of a cross with higher ceilings in the center sections on all sides and a small dome rising in the center. The interior was well-lighted through windows positioned in the raised cruciform part of the room. The walls of the central room were finely plastered and covered with paintings. On the walls of the northwestern corner section, at a height 2.60 m above the present pavement, just below the wooden ceiling, a frieze was identified, apparently crowning the compositions below.

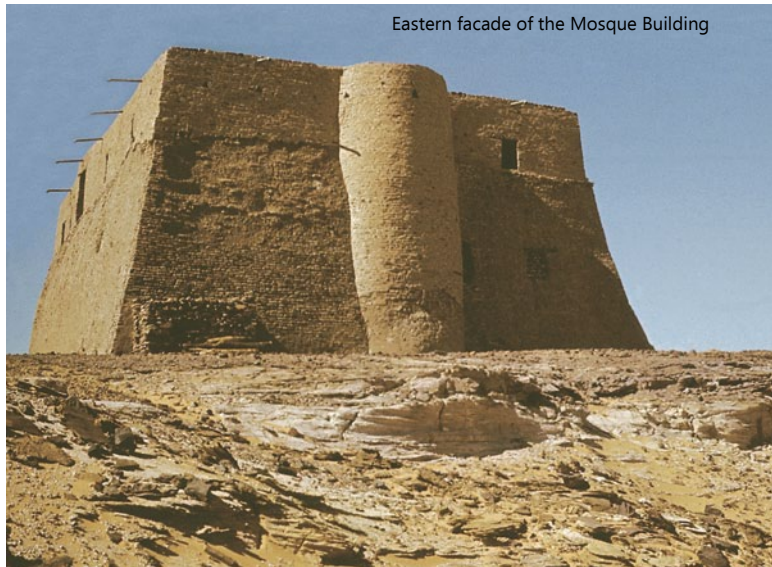
Conservation work in 2010–2012 uncovered all of the surviving painted decoration, including a number of surprising compositions, contributing new elements and themes to the known iconographic repertoire (Godlewski 2012: 310–313). Beside royal representations, fragmentarily preserved in the southwestern corner and archangels on the pilasters in the entrance, the murals included a few christological scenes, beginning with an elaborate Nativity on the east wall. A narrative composition from the childhood of Christ appeared on the earliest

plaster layer in the southwestern corner of the hall. At present one can discern Mary holding up the Child, who is picking dates from a palm tree that had leaned down at his mother's request. The scene, which is based on apocryphal gospel, has not been noted hitherto in Nubian wall painting iconography.

A composition of greater complexity than had been believed before conservation, was found on the north wall to the west of the entrance. The cross with five tondos — a central one with a representation of Christ and four with the apocalyptic beings on the arms — stood centrally at the top of a set of steps. Flanking the cross at the base was a series of white-robed figures seated on thrones; the exact number of these figures is difficult to ascertain due to the poor state of preservation of the wall plaster. These were most likely wise men (elders) and there should have been 24 of them, twelve each on either side. Other fragmentary figures, presumably adoring the cross, can be seen on either side at the base of the cross. The composition would therefore be unique in Nubian painting, referring to the text of the



Throne Hall, upper floor



Eastern facade of the Mosque Building

Revelation of St John and a text attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem, a fragment of which, translated into the Old Nubian language, was found at Qasr Ibrim in 1982. Translated by Michael Browne, it reads: "...when the four (living creatures) give glory, honor and thanksgiving, the twenty-four white, glorious priests, when they take off their crowns, worship the throne...".

The north and south corridors may have originally featured columnar porticoes, resembling in this the recently uncovered Upper Church in Banganarti (Żurawski 2004: 234–242) or the Desert Church in Adindan (Mileham 1910: 38–39). The presence of such porticoes in the building at Dongola is strongly suggested by a red-brick facing on the outside of the mud-brick walls forming the square hall. In the local building tradition, red brick facing was commonly used for external walls. Moreover, even in its present shape, the corridor around this central hall,

which was turned into a mosque in 1317, has windows in the north and south facade and there are large openings at the opposite ends of the western corridor. The use of columns in porticoes in the 9th century is borne out by other Dongolan foundations of the time, e.g., the Cruciform Church (CC) and Church D, where columns appeared both as structural supports and in porticoes.

In the middle of the eastern wing of the corridor, a large and deep apse opened off it. It was built atop a semicircular tower projecting from the eastern facade. Two granite columns flanked the apse entrance in the way of triumphal arches in the apses of early basilical churches.

Filling the space on either side of the staircase were two rectangular rooms with windows and wooden ceilings. They were accessible from the long platform at the top of the steps and from the western wing of the corridor.



Reconstruction of the Throne Hall as it may have looked in the mid 9th century, view from the west

A narrow compartment, now partly destroyed, was separated from the northern of these two rooms, at its western end. Another such compartment existed south of the apse (now accessible from the east wing of the corridor). These two installations recall the narrow rooms recognized as toilet depositories in houses in Makuria. A similar function of these compartments, or at least the one next to the stairs on the first floor of the Mosque building, is very likely. The room siding the apse may have served some liturgical function, perhaps as a small sacristy.

The staircase proceeded to give access to the next level, which was most probably a terrace roof around the raised part above the central hall. The exit from the staircase was presumably roofed over and there was a balustrade running around the terrace. It is also likely that the toilet in the northwestern corner of the building was roofed and

accessible from this level. Thus, the superstructure on the roof would have been 9 m long and 5 m wide. Its existence is further confirmed by some kind of roof construction documented on Frédéric Cailliaud's drawing of the building made in 1821.

The original building has been interpreted variously over the years: as a church, monastery and even royal castle. The unnaturally high ground floor, the monumental staircase leading to the first floor and terrace, and the upper-floor layout with central square hall, as well as the murals identified on the walls of the staircase and central hall, suggest instead that the building was of an official and non-residential nature. It may well have been intended as an awe-inspiring royal throne hall for official audiences and other ceremonies. The Bulgarian tsars had similar audience halls at Plisca and Preslav, imitating in this the monumental audience halls of the Byzantine emperors in Constantinople.



Tondo with Christ at the center of a cross with Four Living Creatures, mural from the Throne Hall



A king's crown, mural from the Throne Hall