

SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



Volume 25

2021

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From development displacement and salvage archaeology in Nubia to inclusive sustainable heritage and development crafting in Old Dongola

Peter Bille Larsen

Introduction

As heritage increasingly engages with sustainable development principles and approaches, what does this mean for countries like Sudan, that are facing massive socio-economic challenges, whilst undergoing intense development and socio-political transitions? This article is about these effects, but also the connections and changing relationships between archaeology, heritage and development narratives in Sudan. In addition, a brief historical detour to the Nubian campaign and the beginning of excavations at Old Dongola between the 3rd and 4th Cataracts will draw out the importance of shifting modernist development and heritage narratives in shaping the lives of riverine Nubian communities. While these years were a success story reinforcing Nubiology as a scientific discipline and the conservation of pre-Islamic heritage, they also highlight a track record of development-induced displacement and fragmented heritage as well as the limitations and constraints in securing an integrated heritage. In response to calls for more inclusive heritage in the Nile valley, the final section will review recent experiences in Old Dongola to revisit the World Heritage vision for the area and attempts to secure wider stakeholder commitments to a sustainable landscape-based approach to heritage in the area. By juxtaposing both challenges and opportunities with the heritage and development interface, the article aims to help craft more inclusive heritage approaches able to address both ancient and living heritage and the rights of contemporary communities.

International excavations and ambiguities of success

In 1964, the Polish archaeologist Kazimierz Michałowski initiated excavations at Old Dongola, Sudan shortly after participating in the UNESCO Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia (Hassan 2007). While it was neither the first dam project, nor the first instance of salvage archaeology on the Nile, Michałowski and others played instrumental roles in internationalising the field by saving the temples of Abu Simbel, Taffa, and Dabod faced with the Aswan High Dam flooding (Kucharczyk 2019). After initial work in Egypt, he led a salvage excavation in northern Sudan leading to what has been called the ‘miracle of Faras’, the discovery of an ancient cathedral with some 120 frescoes and inscriptions in Coptic, Greek and Old Nubian, many of which are now exhibited at the National Museum in Warsaw (while Faras remains 40m below Lake Nubia). Michałowski gained international recognition for the Faras discovery (Vantini 1970; Michałowski 1980) paving the way for excavations at Old Dongola. In retrospect, mobilising resources to undertake excavations in Sudan during the Cold War was no mean achievement, given the widely held perceptions of archaeology as a bourgeois science (Klimowicz and Klimowicz 2013). Even the risk of such ‘miracle finds’ assisting a religious revival back home where the Catholic church occupied a contentious position appear to have been avoided. Instead, Michałowski’s work was seen as a Polish success story of an international heroic rescue effort abroad with even the postal service producing stamps featuring Faras (Klimowicz and Klimowicz 2013, 299). The Aswan High Dam, it should be noted, received Soviet financing and Polish involvement was a matter of international cooperation in line with the foreign policy priorities of a country without a colonial legacy in Africa (Klimowicz and Klimowicz 2013, 291).

The success of the Nubian campaign was instrumental in boosting international interest in heritage cooperation. Nubian heritage has a foundational role in the global World Heritage narrative, with the

rescue mission demonstrating the potency of international efforts facilitating the adoption of the World Heritage Convention in 1972. Today, the World Heritage Centre presents the Nubian Campaign as ‘a complete and spectacular success’¹ and ‘the largest manifestation of cultural solidarity’ (Paolini 2005, quoted in Kleinitz 2013), despite the dam leading to the massive displacement of thousands of Nubians and their resulting marginalisation (Agha 2019; Hassan 2007).² Even the addition of the Nubian monuments to the World Heritage list, despite removal from their original location and compromised spatial integrity, left its Outstanding Universal Value as ‘indisputable’ (Kleinitz 2013, 438). Yet, the social and cultural effects were immense and poorly documented despite salvage efforts (Fernea 1963).³ Hassan notes several stages of relocation of the Nubian population from the initial construction and subsequently upon increasing the height of the dam and its construction (2007). Rowan describes how Nubians were resettled in arid locations far from the Nile, losing both their homelands and intangible heritage (Rowan 2017), although others offer a less negative view of the resettlement process in the long term (Scudder 2016). I have elsewhere described this friction as a birth defect of the World Heritage Convention, demonstrating how acting on behalf of humanity in the name of heritage of Outstanding Universal Value did not prevent, and perhaps even facilitated, the exclusion and marginalisation of others (Larsen 2017, 7). Hassan notes how it was unfortunate that ‘international expeditions demanded 50% of the finds for museums in their respective countries’ (2007, 80) leading to loss of heritage and fragmentation, whereas others have stressed the importance of such sharing as important to secure finance back home (Klimowicz and Klimowicz 2013). It should also be noted how the 50% division of finds with international expeditions had been enshrined in Egyptian antiquities law since 1912. It was not a new development and was not changed after independence. While general antiquities sales and exports were forbidden in 1983, 10% of finds could be granted to foreign missions until 2010.⁴

In practice, 37 frescoes from Faras were kept in Sudan, while 62 paintings and other objects were sent to Poland (Klimowicz and Klimowicz 2013, 298). Kleinitz describes the parallel processes of objects and monumental structures being dismantled and re-assembled in Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and the United States ‘creating new (and often museum-based) heritage spaces’ (Kleinitz 2013, 431). While Nubian heritage was being recognised, shared and globalised, questions of fragmentation, displacement and exclusivity remained.

What is important from a contemporary heritage perspective was the underlying divide between the very ancient and materially significant heritage salvaged versus the contemporary, intangible heritage that was ultimately sacrificed. In the wider context of Nubian and Sudanese archaeology (Edwards 2007), even the very term Nubiology, reportedly coined by Michałowski, has been defined as a historical and archaeological sub-discipline mainly oriented towards ancient Nubia (Michałowski 1974) without including contemporary Nubian society and culture. Michałowski acted as the first chairman of the International Society for Nubian Studies (Żurawski 2019) hosting an international meeting in 1972 on the opening of the Faras Gallery (now the Professor Kazimierz Michałowski Faras Gallery) in the National Museum in Warsaw. While there was sensitivity to the plight of affected communities, Michałowski and others, adopted neutral scientific positions with respect to both the host country and domestic political arenas. For some contemporary archaeologists, such neutrality is no longer tenable given the human cost

¹ www.unesco.org, accessed 22/7/2021.

² While Sudan has not yet ratified ILO Convention 169 on the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples, it is noteworthy that ILO Convention 107 remains in force in Egypt with clear conditions relevant to addressing legacy issues of resettlement, amongst others.

³ The American University in Cairo’s Social Research Centre undertook a poorly-funded Nubian Ethnological Survey including an ecological survey by Thayer Scudder, who would later play a key role in shaping World Bank policy and practice on dams and resettlement (Fernea 1963).

⁴ See further for example: Stevenson 2021.

involved.

Without embarking on a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which Nubian identity and heritage were affected by the Aswan High Dam and the material heritage at the time, it is noteworthy how oblivion, lack of voice and marginality are not only signs of a 20th century modernist past. The 21st century case of the Chinese, German and French-built Merowe Dam reveals both continuity and change in top-down governance, but also a process of learning to address the complexities of heritage, development and salvage archaeology. Once again archaeologists struggled to navigate stormy waters with, on one side, dam developers, engineers and developmentalists with piece-meal attention to socio-cultural safeguard principles, and on the other side, affected communities, international pressure and human rights organisations (Kleinitz and Näser 2011). Operational since 2008, the Merowe Dam flooded some 180km of the Nile landscape. Over 70,000 people were forcibly displaced between 2003 and 2009 (Hafsaas-Tsakos 2011). A number of lessons stand out.

First, from the perspective of continuity, collective salvage archaeology efforts coordinated by the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM) led to the Merowe Dam Archaeological Salvage Project (MDASP) with surveys and excavations resulting in the recording of thousands of archaeological sites and the expansion of knowledge about the area's prehistory (Welsby 2009).

Second, as Kleinitz and Näser note: 'While archaeologists went to considerable efforts to record archaeological sites, little attention was given to the living culture of the affected communities (Kleinitz and Näser 2011, 260)'.⁵ Ethnographic descriptions contrasting modernist success narratives of resettlement with the violent reality of insecurity, flooding and loss are found in Hänsch's ethnographic chronology of displacement (Hänsch 2012). Hänsch also demonstrates the distinct histories of (dis)engagement between government agencies and local communities over several years as well as negotiations turning into forms of resistance. Despite community protests, the national press was pressured by the security services to abstain from openly criticising resettlement (Hänsch 2012, 180, footnote 5).

Third, Merowe dynamics prompted the emergence of local community agency and claims of the ownership of heritage. Kleinitz and Näser speak of a 'failed Cultural Resource Management (CRM) project, as many of the archaeological missions active in the area were expelled from their concessions by representatives of the local communities. By effectively ending the archaeological salvage efforts, local people attempted to use cultural heritage as a weapon in their struggle against the developer' (Kleinitz and Näser 2011).

Fourth, open opposition to the dam project bypassing international standards was largely avoided.⁶ 'few objections to the dam project were raised by the majority of the involved archaeologists, and no protest had been filed by the archaeologists involved since the mid-1990s – long before the building of the dam had actually started' (Hafsaas-Tsakos 2011, 66).

As the authors also note, archaeologists were among the only foreigners present during construction. Some individual archaeologists and professional organisations, such as the International Society of Nubian Studies, have subsequently taken public positions against proposed dam projects (Kleinitz and Näser 2011, 273). Indeed, Cornelia Kleinitz and Claudia Näser speak of the 'loss of innocence' where: 'taking a 'neutral stance' within this web of interests while at the same time failing to consult with local communities about their heritage values and views of the past proved extremely counter-productive for

⁵ Official responses, by the Dam Implementation Unit, were described as 'exceedingly minimal' with six researchers interviewing 30 informants, gathering 14 hours of video (El Mahdi Bushra 2006, quoted in Rowan 2017, 179).

⁶ Whereas many were critical behind the scenes and in their home countries, Kleinitz and Näser speak of the risk that: 'Archaeological missions by their very presence lent the dam project (with all its shortcomings) credibility, and archaeologists may have implicitly sanctioned human rights abuses by remaining silent, should be of great concern to the professional community' (Kleinitz and Näser, 2011, 269).

the archaeological missions' (Kleinitz and Näser 2011, 273).

The point here is that decades of archaeological work in the Nile basin reveal the complexity between heritage and development. On one hand, a series of collaborative efforts and relationships between archaeologists and communities emerged from salvage activities. On the other hand, challenges were also apparent; from development-induced displacement to the implicit exclusion of immaterial heritage from mainstream discourse. This has led to calls for more socially engaged practice and archaeological heritage solutions 'that can preserve the cultural heritage and the cultural landscape in its natural environment' (Hafsaas-Tsakos 2011, 66). Also, in response to the loss of Nubian cultural identity, 'the remainder of their 'living culture' and identity is now in need of 'salvage' leading to calls for a 'more inclusive definition of heritage and a modification of 'heritage practices'' (Kleinitz 2013, 458). How do we avoid the risk of Nubianity being relegated to an ancient past, neglecting and misrepresenting the plight and rights of contemporary communities and cultural landscapes? Indeed, with deep-seated legacies of exclusion, it is more pressing to find heritage and development solutions that are not just convenient, but do no further harm, and harness efforts to build, reconcile, provide redress for and empower Nubian communities. What room is there for a different practice reinforcing local connection and redressing forgotten voices (Rowan 2017) rather than displacing them in the name of the new transitional nation state? How do we move towards approaches more attuned to contemporary realities of Nubian communities without losing touch with rich archaeological legacies? In a context of Sudanese archaeological practice largely shaped by foreign missions (Hafsaas-Tsakos 2011), how can this position be mobilised towards alternative approaches? In the wider context of peacebuilding in several conflict-ridden parts of the country, is there a role for international heritage designations to support and develop realistic alternatives? Recent World Heritage activities in Sudan, namely at 'Gebel Barkal and the Sites of the Napatan Region', inscribed in 2003, and the 'The Archaeological Sites of the Island of Meroe' inscribed in 2011 reveal the challenges of dealing with infrastructure development, reconstruction and external landscape perspectives (Kleinitz 2013). Whereas preparation and inscription coincided with dam developments, Kleinitz underlines the specific values fitting modern Sudan, yet leaving major challenges in the linkages and even the devaluation of 'living heritage' unresolved (2013). To summarise, heritage and development are not merely about development-induced displacement alone, but also about reworking heritage concepts and practice to respond to the needs and rights of contemporary communities. The Old Dongola cultural landscape and heritage process, described below, thus stands out as an alternative for trying out new approaches.

Alternative heritage and development visions

In 2018, Artur Obłuski and Tomomi Fushiya⁷ suggested I join the University of Warsaw archaeology mission to help stimulate heritage and sustainable development in Old Dongola. After six decades of Polish-Sudanese excavations, there was interest in closer engagement with local communities drawing upon wider efforts to strengthen heritage and sustainable development (Larsen and Logan 2018).

In contrast with other areas under threat of dam construction, the issues experienced in Old Dongola were of a different nature and scale. The Polish mission had a long-term involvement in the area from the early 1960s working through many changes, such as the presidency of Jaafar Nimeiry (twice) including his adoption of *sharia*; the democratic government of Sadiq al Madhi, and the 30-year rule of Omar al-Bashir and his 'Civilisation Project', until the recent political transitions (not to mention political changes in Poland). The work presented here coincided with protests and the coup d'état with the Bashir regime ultimately being replaced by a transitional military-civilian administration in 2019. Over the next few

⁷ See further this issue, Fushiya 2021; Obłuski and Dzierzbicka 2021. Thanks to Tomomi Fushiya for comments on an initial version of this article.

years until March 2021, three research visits and consultations were undertaken with advice from colleagues⁸ to explore heritage and development connections and help identify ways forward.

Whereas a dam was not projected in the Old Dongola area, shifting towards a different approach was not a given and revealed a legacy of divisions. Local practice had largely been shaped by archaeological excavations and activities. Although state authorities were nominally in charge, under-funded heritage authorities had a very limited presence. Heritage activities were, in turn, largely perceived as the role and even responsibility of the Polish mission,⁹ who worked to support an increased state presence in the area.

This led to shifting relationships with local communities from friendships, mutual support and working relationships to periods of distance with local communities and even suspicion (Obluski pers. comm.). Questions about whether interest in Christian medieval layers involved a hidden agenda to rebuild churches and the Christian faith were not uncommon, yet contrasted by day-to-day working relationships, explanations and trust-building exchanges during the digging seasons.

Whereas the Polish mission had previously kept a distance from local stakeholders, the new leadership of the Old Dongola team and the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology recognised the importance of strengthening dialogue and engagement with local communities and authorities to better understand each other and identify new forms of cooperation. In an area with very little actual management presence, on-going questions of land management and encroachment, ownership and boundaries were omnipresent.

Situating Old Dongola

Situated some 350km north of Khartoum, halfway between the 3rd and 4th Cataracts, Old Dongola (known as *Dongola al Ajuz* in Arabic) is on the National List of Scheduled Monuments of Sudan (Figure 1). It has been on the tentative list of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention since 1994.

Located in the Northern State between the village of Ghaddar and Bokkibul, the site is significant both for the Makurian period (5th–14th century AD) and the subsequent Funj period (15th–18th century AD). From the construction of the citadel in the 5th century, urbanisation up to the 14th century and its gradual abandonment starting in the 18th century, the site was the capital of the Kingdom of Makuria, converting to Christianity in the 6th century and then to Islam in the 14th century.

The Mosque in the area has been described as: ‘perhaps the most important, symbolic edifice in the medieval history of Sudan. For over 450

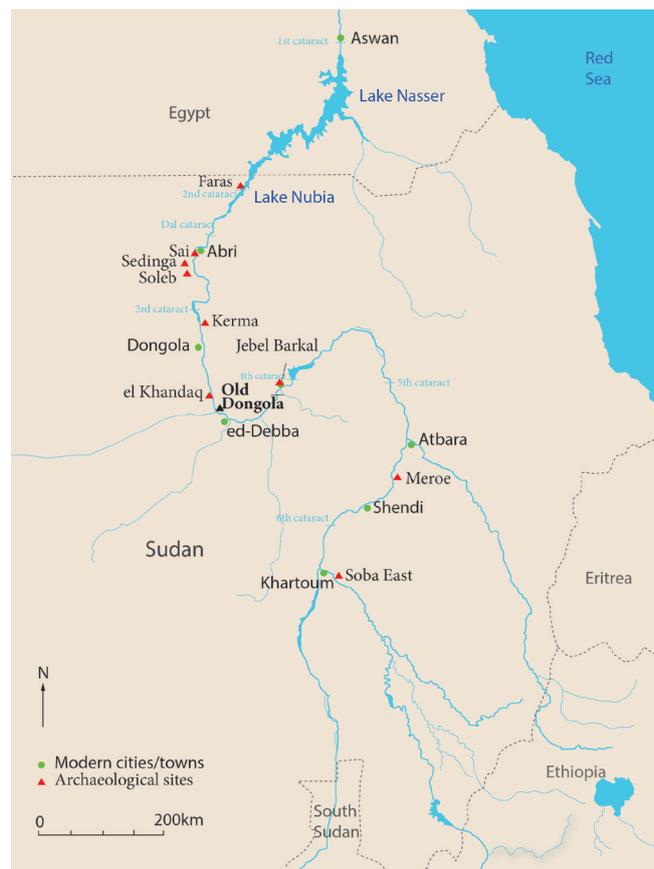


Figure 1. Location of Old Dongola (courtesy of UMMA).

⁸ Many thanks to Professor Artur Obluski and his team, not least Dr Tomomi Fushiya, Dr Mahmoud el-Tayeb and Zaki ed-Deen Mahmoud for their commitment, friendship and professionalism. Particular thanks to Professor Baloula Mohammed Baloula for joining the conversations, his cultural sensitivity, insights and patience when interpreting from Arabic to English.

⁹ This is to some extent a reflection of legal requirements attached to the concession, which includes the research, conservation and site preparation.

years it served as a throne hall for the Makurian kings, then in 1317 it was transformed into a mosque. Nowadays, it is known as the oldest preserved mosque in Sudan' (Obłuski *et al.* 2013). The citadel and urban structures are in the south surrounded by housing and cemeteries from different periods. The narrative is of the site gradually being abandoned in late 19th and early 20th centuries with the main mosque closing for public use in 1969 (Godlewski 2013) leaving what is today known as an 'abandoned village'.

Shifting value narratives and perspectives

Over 60 years of cooperation between the Polish Archeological Expedition and NCAM (Drab 2018) has brought to light predominantly Christian parts of the site's heritage, leading to Old Dongola having been placed on the UNESCO World Heritage tentative list since 1994. The current tentative list description thus stresses the Christian period, building on the cumulative research by NCAM and the Polish mission: 'Old Dongola was the capital of the Christian Kingdom of Makouria (7th–14th century). The site contains many churches, houses and mosques. The walls of some buildings are decorated with very fine frescoes'.¹⁰

If Nubian Christianity has been described as 'neglected heritage' (Bowers 1985), it was the Christian remains at Old Dongola that arguably shaped and gave direction to the archaeology in the first decades as well as the initial World Heritage description in 1994. This led to a bias towards the pre-Islamic period in terms of research and documentation, and also conservation. This tentative listing, and the underlying narrative based on the medieval period, had also reduced visibility of local Islamic heritage. Many members of the surrounding communities were involved in the day to day excavation, resulting in a commonly-held perception of heritage as being primarily concerned with the Christian medieval period – not merely a matter of expert vision or authorised heritage discourse (Smith 2006), but as something which was arguably produced by six decades of excavation focused on that period. While Kleinitz notes how 'most foreign archaeologists – and international tourists alike – show little interest in Sudan's Islamic past and present' (Kleinitz 2013), this has recently changed at Old Dongola.

There has been a growing attempt to situate medieval period in a broader historical context and a network of long-distance trade and communications. What also emerged during this research was an elaborate cultural geography tying the medieval remains and the *Qubbat* with more recent histories and the spread of Islam in Sudan and beyond (Figures 2 and 3). The area played a central role in the arrival and spread of Islam in the northern part of Sudan, testifying to its significance not only from a local perspective, but also from a broader global and regional perspective in terms of the transition, co-existence and spread of Islam in Africa and even the United States (see below).¹¹

Although previously the Christian remains were seen as the core of the site (based on the archaeological concession), and the surrounding Islamic layers as the periphery, with a discontinuity between the ancient past and contemporary communities, discussions with local communities and leaders revealed an alternative narrative stressing both connection and continuity.

This led to a dialogue with national authorities and other stakeholders to consider modifying the Outstanding Universal Value description and tentative listing from the Christian period, to one of a more inclusive riverine cultural landscape. Whereas the focus on the Christian period was the starting point for the archaeology, as well as remaining central to the NCAM description of the area on the tentative list, it was increasingly clear that a cultural landscape perspective could enable the representation of an

¹⁰ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/652/>, accessed 1/8/21.

¹¹ The *Qubbat* of the area were considered among the first in Sudan, and important information obtained during interviews concerning what locals call the 'six *qubbat* of the kings' offers potential leads into transition periods and practices in Makuria demonstrating, again, the importance of a broader historical transition and landscape perspective with attributes indicating the transition from Christianity to Islam.



Figure 2. Recognising the significance of the *Qubbat*.



Figure 3. Exploring cultural geographies with local religious leaders, February 2020.

ensemble of heritage values and attributes, which tie together a sequence of periods and wider tangible and intangible aspects through a mode of continuity maintained today. This landscape approach would provide opportunities to connect the medieval remains with contemporary practices as living heritage. Such an inclusive notion, which integrates both tangible and intangible heritage in the Old Dongola area, potentially has numerous advantages not least by presenting a more holistic view of heritage. This also made sense to local communities, who expressed a strong interest in joining and supporting work on heritage in the area (Larsen 2021).

Recognising customary connections

Consultations soon revealed long-standing community claims to what is rather erroneously known as the ‘abandoned village’. Interviews in 2019 and 2020 with local villagers revealed the cultural significance of the ‘abandoned village’, in terms of individual family histories as well as portrayals of the Koranic schools, spaces, paths and cemeteries still visible in the landscape. It formed a cultural whole with contemporary villages reflecting histories of socio-cultural organisation and the longstanding continuity of place and space in the wider Old Dongola landscape.

House owners and families continue to claim ownership of buildings and lands including riverbanks, building on traditional inheritance principles as well as on-going use of houses e.g. during the *Eid*. Such customary tenure rights are shaped largely by three subclans and long-standing social relations, which are also central to the tenure and stewardship of the cemeteries and other areas.¹² Some traditional owners now live in the immediate vicinity (el-Ghaddar, Bokkibul, Djabarona and Ghaba), while others

¹² The cemeteries are divided among subclans/families, who currently have no preservation plans. Yet, interviews suggested willingness to engage in discussions along those lines should an integrated cultural landscape approach be adopted.



Figure 4. Informal lines at Old Dongola, November 2019.



Figure 5. Sign set up in 'abandoned' house to claim family ownership, November 2019.

have moved away, yet the area continues to attract family and kin on key occasions, just as the cemeteries continue to be used.

Even if official maps were largely absent, with limited circulation in government, and did not reflect local ownership, a form of counter mapping was visible in the archaeological landscape through signs indicating ownership and lines in the landscape to demarcate property (Figures 4 and 5).

From an anthropological perspective, both cemeteries and the abandoned village form part of contemporary villages and continuously renewed family networks, even connecting distant diaspora communities with Old Dongola. In the broader context of disruption and displacement, such continuities arguably gain another level of significance.

The local population identifies strongly with place and heritage maintaining a strong and vibrant connection to *Dongola al Ajuz* in historical, religious, agricultural and identity terms. Yet the area also represents significant movements, whether for religious and or economic reasons, which form part of the local social, moral and cultural fabric (Abusharaf 1997). On one of my first trips to the area, I asked local leaders to show me around, including the Islamic cemeteries. Among other things, they identified the tomb of Satti Majid Muhammad al-Qadi, who upon migrating to the United States in the early 20th century reportedly took the New York Times to court, when the paper refused to publish his articles in defence of Islam (Abu Shouk *et al.* 1997).¹³ Other reports point to Satti Majid establishing the following benevolent societies in the US: the Muslim Unity Society, the Islamic Missionary Society, the Red Crescent Society and the Islamic Benevolent Society (Abu Shouk *et al.* 1997, 142). Not only had the area been subject to Christian missionaries in ancient times, it was also a source for Islamic missionary societies in the United States. Finding the tomb of Satti Majid was a reminder of the religious vitalism of the area – as well as the importance of mutual support societies – not only of historical significance, but also central for understanding contemporary social dynamics and the living heritage of Old Dongola.

Indeed, during fieldwork, people stressed that Islamic values and local sheikhs were key facilitators

¹³ 'When the New York Times refused to publish his articles in defence of Islam, Satti Majid took the newspaper to court to force them to publish his articles or pay \$200,000 in damages for pillorying Islam and insulting its dignity. The court found in Satti's favour. The whole episode caused a great stir; Satti Majid became known as Shaykh al-Islam fi 'l'Amrika and a number of American, Afghans, Indians and Africans converted to Islam' (Abu Shouk *et al.* 1997, 142).

of dialogue with other community members; just as the willingness to set-up support committees for heritage and development was arguably built on a willingness to unite around a common objective.

From paper park to cultural landscape and community management?

As practical management was largely absent, there was confusion about site boundaries, rules and regulations during fieldwork. To what extent this was deliberately maintained or produced to facilitate agricultural encroachment and construction is unclear, yet the resulting vacuum neither benefited the protection of the site nor provided a solid foundation for long-term development planning. On the other hand, however, it did open up the opportunity to recognise customary tenure practices that are currently in limbo. This raises questions about how to build on the individual and collective tenure involved in agricultural and cemetery areas if these are included in the cultural landscape approach.

Whereas the spatial logic in the current archaeological concession, and *de facto* heritage, model defines the medieval remains as the core and surrounding Islamic cemeteries, villages and agricultural landscapes as peripheral and a buffer zone,¹⁴ a cultural landscape approach would allow for a more integrated approach encompassing the wider landscape, that could allow for different zoning arrangements building on customary tenure rights. It is also a major opportunity to promote an integrated vision, which takes into account the wider set of values in the unique cultural landscape. This also includes oral traditions, ethnicity, *Danagla* connections and the *Dongolawi (Andaandi)* language. However, both the heritage of Old Dongola and customary tenure rights remain poorly documented and were in need of mapping to be effectively – and equitably – mobilised.

The natural landscape context was considered equally important. The excavation areas are located within a lived riverine landscape including both settlements and agriculture. The main season from October to March involves cultivation of crops such as *ful* (beans), potatoes, onions and more, by some 100 households. The nearby agricultural island located right in front of the site, for example, represents an important manifestation of living heritage, yet is often seen as separate from the excavation areas (Figure 6).

For this island, *Fagron*, working on heritage and addressing customary tenure and on-going practices requires engaging with approximately 100 farming households. Whereas it appears there are no collective decision-making mechanisms for the island as a whole, some progress in that direction would be important considering the emergence of investment projects, as well as the possibility of integrating the area in a broader landscape vision.

Overall, there is much to gain from an integrated heritage vision both in terms of connecting periods, but also connecting with people and the wider riverine landscape. The local population identifies strongly with its local place-based identity and heritage, and maintains a strong and vibrant connection to *Dongola al Ajuz* in historical, religious, agricultural and identity terms. Some also underline the importance of their Nubian identity.

Stakeholder consultations identified a series of action opportunities to strengthen participation building on Nubian culture and identity as living heritage (Figure 7). From a UNESCO perspective, such connections are at the heart of the organisation's focus. This also triggers distinct implications for Old Dongola communities such as the requirement of the government to implement Free Prior and Informed Consent processes in the World Heritage nomination as required by the Operational Guidelines of the World Heritage Convention.

There is however a lack of a concerted spatial planning approach for this type of region. An immediate priority could involve the preparation of zoning arrangements building on customary practices with

¹⁴ The current zoning identifies the Muslim cemetery (the area of *qubbat* and other graves) as a buffer zone.



Figure 6. View of the agricultural island from the excavation area. Figure 7. Stakeholder discussions at the site.

guidelines covering the whole Old Dongola area. This offers an opportunity for national authorities to build on local community rights rather than extinguishing them as is sometimes seen. Specific discussions involved strengthening the local committees to have greater representation of religious authorities, major families and farming communities working collaboratively with heritage authorities in design and management. From a World Heritage perspective, community tenure, security and stewardship are priorities in a sustainable development approach.

Towards World Heritage nomination and Sustainable Development at Old Dongola

A central idea explored was a World Heritage-based development path to preserve the unique heritage and bring long-term landscape conservation and socio-economic improvements to the area. Since 2015, State Parties to the World Heritage convention are encouraged to apply a sustainable development framework to their World Heritage site management. This involves taking into account environmental, social and economic aspects for site management together with ‘the fostering of peace and security’. Since 2005, the World Heritage Committee has stressed community participation as an important angle.

Could a revised World Heritage format address some of the challenges and opportunities identified? Past engagement demonstrated considerable local interest and support for development, yet also deep-running challenges linked to socio-political change, the limited resources of national authorities, changing public leadership and multiple stakeholders. Not only had the site’s presence on the tentative list been dormant for more than a quarter of a century, the period was characterised by uncertainty. At both local and state levels, there were changes in leadership and many discussions involved parallel dialogues between current, former and future leaders. In terms of heritage management, the situation was largely of *de facto* absence of actual management, with no management plan or effective coordination between different layers of government. Upon arrival, there were no mechanisms for dialogue and participation between authorities and local communities. While the new initiative had to be built from scratch, it also soon revealed a vibrant group of local community representatives who tirelessly engaged with both archaeologists and heritage authorities in setting up an Old Dongola support committee and preparing concrete proposals for action (for further information see Larsen 2021). At the national level, proposals to move ahead with a World Heritage nomination were received positively by the then newly appointed

Minister of Culture and his team of advisors, despite also struggling with more immediate concerns. At the beginning of 2021, stakeholder consultations were organised to present research findings and facilitate collective deliberation on heritage and development at Old Dongola. Despite Covid restrictions, the attendance of Intisar Soghyroum, Minister of Higher Education and Science, national and regional authorities alongside local communities, authorities and representatives testified to the importance attached to the area and its future. After lively debates and visits to both Christian and Islamic sites, the group worked towards a shared vision and agenda for Old Dongola.

At the end of the consultation, the highly committed group of local, national and international stakeholders signed up to the *Nafeer*, a Sudanese approach for a collective effort to build something together. In this case, the commitment was towards a future for Old Dongola where heritage is an integral part of sustainable development. Specifically, this commitment involved six pillars of action to cooperate on a World Heritage nomination, sustainable development and planning based on: 1) heritage values for development; 2) cultural landscape planning; 3) local participation and joint management; 4) community rights and security of tenure; 5) community-based tourism; 6) local entrepreneurship and women's empowerment.

Subsequently, UNESCO initiated work to document intangible cultural heritage, and the national authorities to take forward the World Heritage nomination plans. Whereas many challenges lie ahead, the Old Dongola efforts demonstrated the potential for alternative heritage and development paths built on inclusion and community engagement. At the same time, consultations also left open a series of questions. Would national heritage authorities follow through with commitments to systematically work with local communities and build joint management mechanisms? How effectively would customary tenure rights and claims be addressed in processes of formalising boundaries and zoning arrangements? To what extent would the shift from a narrow focus on the medieval Christian period towards a more holistic approach be adopted by national authorities? From another perspective, how would social and political transitions intersect with heritage developments? Could heritage planning be mobilised to address legacies of excluding Nubian culture and identity, Sufi traditions and other local practices and attributes?

Concluding remarks

In a context of contentious heritage and development dynamics, this paper has sought to juxtapose experiences from the early 1960s with 21st century developments, but also emerging opportunities using sustainable development. Given the legacy of displacement and exclusion, current developments in Sudan offer an unprecedented opportunity to rethink heritage, management approaches and practices.

The article documents recent efforts to shift from a 'paper park' government-driven approach to heritage management towards exploring the potential of sustainable and inclusive development. Central to this shift has been working with local stakeholders and exploring a revised World Heritage approach for the site (Larsen 2021). Whereas the vision until recently focused on the Christian medieval period, the shift agreed upon by a diverse group of stakeholders includes a broader value statement promoting an inclusive cultural landscape approach, which underlines the long-standing connections between local communities and the riverine landscape, taking into account multiple values. Local attachment, livelihoods and stewardship are central to the cultural significance of the area and could, from this perspective, be integral to future management efforts.

Whereas stakeholders have acknowledged the importance of recognising customary tenure rights and stewardship, much however remains to be fleshed out, not least building on UNESCO's recognition of indigenous rights as relevant to the nomination process. At the same time, it is critical that national

and local stakeholders adopt spatial planning and zoning arrangements, which enhance cultural connections and stewardship, while preventing infrastructure development and construction that might jeopardise the heritage – and World Heritage potential – of the landscape. This will require revisiting boundary and zoning to provide clear guidelines for both local stakeholders and potential investors in the area. Tourism development has emerged as a clear priority for local stakeholders and represents a key concern, where collaborative decision-making is essential and enhances local employment, secures benefits for communities and creates opportunities for local entrepreneurs and artisans. As Old Dongola moves towards a new management approach with the support of UNESCO and other agencies, this article seeks to draw attention to existing cultural building blocks allowing for more inclusive collaboration. Collaborative decision making and inclusive cultural landscape management are not merely wishful thinking, but sound heritage planning as Sudan moves towards more equitable heritage and development.

Annex: Nafeer for Old Dongola

نفير دنقلا العجوز – لنعمل سويا من اجل دنقلا العجوز
بهذا نعلن نحن الذين التقينا في رحاب دنقلا العجوز في الفترة من ٢١ - ٣١ فبراير ١٢٠٢ بأننا:
نؤكد على أهمية منطقة دنقلا العجوز للمجتمع المحلي، السودان والبشرية جمعاء
نتقاسم سويا مسؤولية حماية تراثها الثقافي ورفع مستوي الوعي بقيمته وراثته
نرحب بتشيحه في قائمة التراث العالمي والمساعدة الدولية في مجال صيانتته
نتزم بالتعاون في تنمية المستدامة وتثمينه من خلال خطة العمل التي تم إعدادها سوياً بركائزها الست و التي هي: ١- التراث أساس للتنمية المستدامة ٢- تخطيط
الموقع التراثي ٣- تعزيز المشاركة المجتمعية والادارة المشتركة ٤- تأمين حقوق الملكية ٥- السياحة المجتمعية ٦- خلق فرص عمل للمجتمع وتعزيز دور المرأة
بذلك ومن أجل ذلك فإننا نوقع بالموافقة على ما سبق ذكره وبأننا سنلتقي سنويا من أجل تجديد إلتزامنا

Nafeer: Working together for Old Dongola

‘We, who have met in Old Dongola for two days on February 12th and 13th, 2021:

Stress the importance of Old Dongola for local communities, Sudan and all humankind.

Share responsibility for protecting and raising awareness of its rich cultural heritage.

Agree to work together towards improved management and a World Heritage nomination.

Commit to cooperate for its sustainable development through a joint action plan and 6 pillars of action;

1) heritage values for development; 2) cultural landscape planning; 3) local participation and joint management; 4) community rights and security of tenure; 5) community-based tourism; 6) local entrepreneurship and women’s empowerment.

We hereby join the ‘Nafir Dongola al-Ajouz’ and agree to meet every year to renew our commitments.’

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