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Front cover. Cattle and two goats\gazelle from Site GRD-14 in the Wadi Gorgod (photo Hamad Mohamed Hamdeen).

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Sheikh and Melik 1925: A short note

Paul T. Nicholson

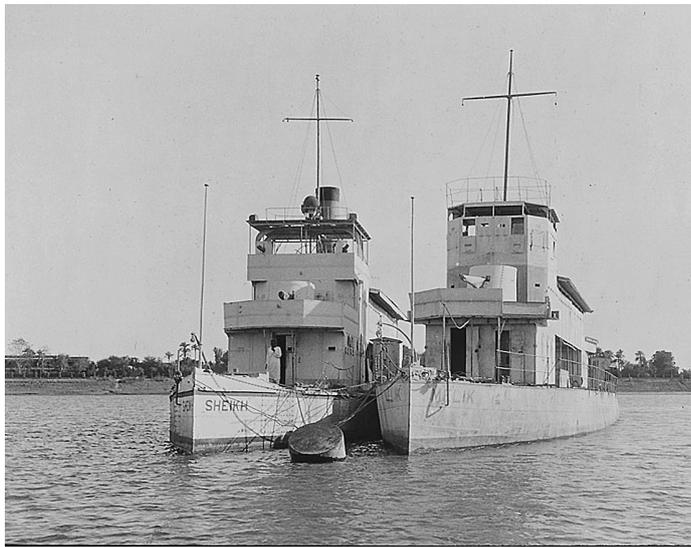


Figure 1. Lantern slide image showing the *Sheikh* and *Melik* moored together at Khartoum in 1925 (author's collection).

Today, the gunboat *Melik* is in the care of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM), with whom the *Melik Society* work toward its restoration. It lies, on dry land, in the grounds of the *Blue Nile Sailing Club*, where it once served as their Club House. The vessel is recognised by NCAM as an important part of Sudan's modern history.

Keown-Boyd (2007) has already commented on the Nile gunboats available to General Gordon in 1884-1885, and those subsequently constructed for Kitchener's reconquest of the Sudan in 1896-1898 that went on to serve in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan before coming into the care of the Sudanese authorities. Two of the gunboats, the *Bordein* from Gordon's

time and the *Melik*, which was Kitchener's vessel and one of three boats shipped, in sections, from Britain to Sudan in 1898, survive in Khartoum.

The three new gunboats commissioned for Kitchener's expedition belong to the *Sultan* class, named after the first of the three vessels. These were to serve alongside three other vessels, the *El-Zafir*, *El-Nasir* and *El-Fateh*, which had been ordered in 1895 for the planned campaign in Dongola. The vessels, shipped from Britain in sections, arrived too late to play a role in the main campaign but were available for this later action (Konstam 2016, 10).

The three *Sultan* class vessels were built on the Thames; the *Melik* by Thornycroft at Chiswick and the *Sultan* and *Sheikh* by Yarrow and Co. of Poplar (Konstam 2016). Yarrow and Co. already had experience of building gunboats for the Nile, having constructed two *Tamai* Class vessels in 1885-1886 (Konstam 2016, 16). The three new vessels, however, were of very sophisticated design, sufficient that they attracted the attention of *Scientific American* (Anon. 1897). Not only could the sections of the vessel be individually shipped to the Nile, but they could then be floated in such a way that they could be assembled on the river without riveting. Furthermore the propulsion screws were concealed within water-filled tubes. Since the draft of the vessel when laden at 35 tons (31.75 metric tonnes) was only two feet (0.609m), this arrangement prevented damage to the screws in the shallow waters of parts of the Nile. In addition, these tubes were so designed as to allow a screw to be removed and refitted whilst the vessel remained afloat. No dry dock was needed and the whole operation could be performed in eight minutes (Anon 1897, 331), a considerable advantage if the vessel was under fire. These vessels were screw-driven in response to the fact that the exposed paddle wheel of stern wheelers, like those of the *El-Zafir* class, could easily be damaged by enemy fire and so disabled. These *Sultan* class vessels not only had the screws protected but an armoured engine compartment. Though the normal complement comprised 30 officers and men, the vessels could carry up to 1000 men 'on an emergency' (Anon 1897, 331; Anon 1898).

Photographs showing the vessels during their builder's trials in 1897 provide information on the



Figure 2. The *Sheikh* moored on the Nile c. 1917. The two Maxim guns and 12-pounder 12-hundredweight guns are clearly visible along with the searchlight. The vessel was in similar condition until 1925 (photo courtesy of J. Anderson).

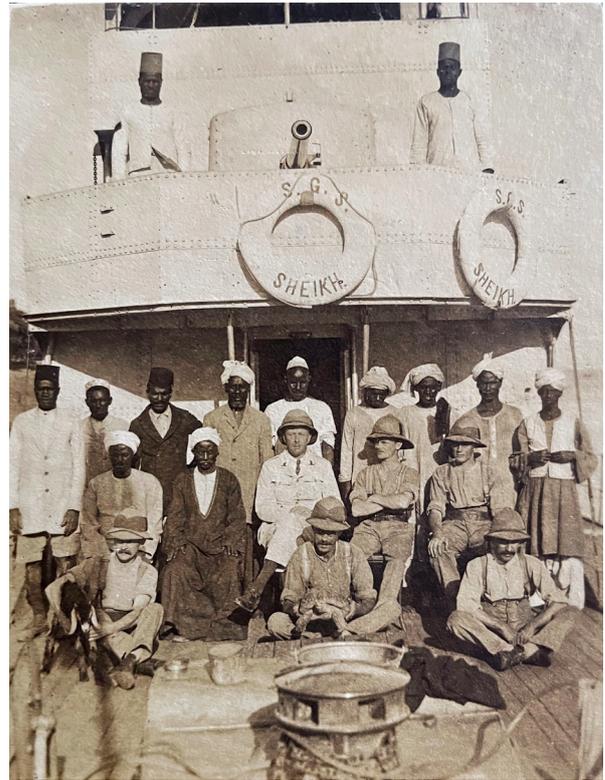


Figure 3. Officers and some of the crew on board the *Sheikh* c. 1917 (photo courtesy of J. Anderson).



Figure 4. Officers and some of the crew on board the *Sheikh* c. 1917 (photo courtesy of J. Anderson).



Figure 5. The *Melik* on the Nile c. 1917. The second of the 12-pounder 12-hundredweight guns can be seen on the rear flying deck as well as two field guns/carriages on the after deck. A temporary structure has been added to the stern behind the field guns (photo courtesy of J. Anderson).



Figure 6. The *Melik* today showing the gun as currently mounted on the foredeck of the vessel.

fittings on the boats and provide a point of reference when examining later images of them. However, dated photographs of these three vessels on the Nile are more rare, but where they survive can offer some information on the condition of boats at particular points in their history. This short note concerns a lantern slide image of two of the three vessels, the *Sheikh* and the *Melik*, which are seen moored together in an image dated to 1925 (Figure 1). The image is from the New York State Education Department Visual Instruction Division and is negative A15005. It bears the caption 'Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Khartoum. Two British Gunboats on the Nile (1925)' along with a code (Cb K Y 7), which probably refers to the year group and classes for which it was thought most suitable. What appears to be the Grand Hotel is visible in the far distance at the left.

The photograph shows some of the armament of the vessels, which is particularly clear on the *Sheikh*. The large gun at the centre of the Flying Deck on both the *Sheikh* and the *Melik* is one of the two 12-pounder guns mounted on that deck while, clearly visible on the *Sheikh*, are two of four automatic Maxim guns on the Bridge Deck. There were originally four more such guns on the Flying Deck. The searchlight

of the *Sheikh* is clearly visible above the bridge. Photographs kindly made available by Dr Julie Anderson, and believed to have been taken in 1917, show the same armaments in position (Figures 2-5).

Overall, the 1925 photograph suggests that the *Sheikh* was in generally better condition than the *Melik* and this may reflect the fact that the latter was being prepared to be sold to the *Blue Nile Sailing Club* as their clubhouse, a transaction that took place in 1926 (Keown-Boyd 2007, 123). The *Sheikh* was destined to become the headquarters of the *Khartoum Yacht Club* (Konstam 2016, 17). The Bridge armour of the *Melik* is, however, complete and part of it is shown closed to reveal only firing slits while other sections are lowered as is one section of the Flying Deck bulwark, a design feature that – when fully lowered – allowed the extension of the firing platform (Anon. 1898, 331). If the Maxim machine guns were present they are not visible in the image.

As it is currently displayed at the *Blue Nile Sailing Club* there is a 12-pounder 12-hundredweight gun (set on a pedestal mounting by Maxim-Nordenfelt, serial no. 2668) on the foredeck of the vessel (Figure 2). This gun is shown in the same position on an image of the vessel during its sailing club days on the *Melik Society* website (<https://www.melik.org.uk/discover/nile-gunboats/>), where the vessel is seen surrounded by pleasure craft. However, earlier images of the vessel show a gun originally mounted on the Flying Deck (<https://www.melik.org.uk/discover/nile-gunboats/crewing-the-nile-gunboats/>), but in this case the shield around the gun is of a different design to the one now on the vessel's prow. Although the pedestal mounting is by Maxim-Nordenfelt, the gun itself may not be and may be later.

It is notable that the elaborate bow decoration visible on the *Melik* during its builders' trials of 1897 (<https://prints.rmg.co.uk/products/melik-1897-moored-off-chiswick-during-builders-trials-g12599>) had gone by the time the image was taken in 1925, with only the decoration around the forecastle remaining. The searchlight, originally fitted above the bridge and which is visible on the 1897 photograph, has been



Figure 7. The *Melik* on the Nile c. 1917. The large arrow drawn on the bow probably indicates the figure of the album's original owner, a soldier named Sargeant. A temporary structure has been added to the stern behind the field guns (photo courtesy of J. Anderson).

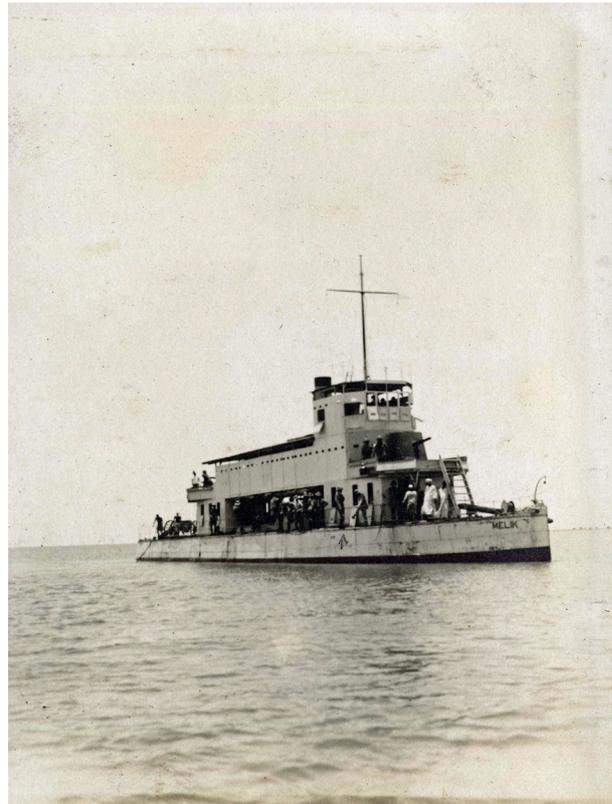


Figure 8. The *Melik* on the Nile c. 1917. The large arrow drawn on the bow probably indicates the figure of the album's original owner, a soldier named Sargeant. The temporary structure is not visible in this image (photo courtesy of J. Anderson).

removed. Photographs believed to have been taken in 1917 show that this bow decoration had already been lost by then, as had the searchlight. The maxim machine guns can, however, be seen (Figures 2, 7-8).

The third of the three Kitchener vessels, the *Sultan*, for whom this class of vessel was named, was scuttled as a breakwater during the construction of the Omdurman Bridge (Konstam 2016, 17) between 1924 and 1926.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Dr Philip Macgrath of the Royal Armouries for his help in tracing details of the gun currently mounted on the *Melik* and to Scarlet Faro of the Royal Museums Greenwich for information regarding the image of *Melik* during her trials of 1897. Dr Julie Anderson kindly made available photographs from an album dated c. 1917 in her personal collection.

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