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Front cover. General view of Site WNP-J-22\1, Al-Jabalain, White Nile State. Photo by Hamad Mohammed Hamdeen.

The Kirwan Memorial Lecture 2023
Forts in Upper Nubia and a new perspective on the first centuries of Alwa and Makuria

Mariusz Drzewiecki

Introduction

The last decades of Meroitic rule and its aftermath, leading to the rise of three medieval kingdoms in the Middle Nile Valley, have been a key point of interest since early exploration in the region. Sir Laurence Kirwan was one of the distinguished scholars who conducted fieldwork on selected main sites from this period. He returned to the subject on several occasions throughout his six-decade long research career.[1] Kirwan brought numerous insights into the debate based on analyses of historical narrations and inscriptions, results of archaeological excavations, and identification of the largest settlements and tumuli cemeteries discussed in the context of local and regional topography.

It was a great honour and privilege to present my research for the Kirwan Memorial Lecture in 2023, since my observations develop the results of Sir Laurence Kirwan's research. However, my narration starts at a different point, and in doing so it offers a look at the debated events from a new perspective. In my studies, I focused on expanding our understanding of fortified sites built in Upper Nubia.[2]

The end of Meroe and the rise of the medieval kingdoms in the Middle Nile Valley were only described by a small number of chroniclers.[3] Hence, the story has numerous gaps and lacks many details. Archaeological research indicates that this was a period when defensive architecture began to be used on a large scale - a detail that written sources do not mention. Fortified sites with their enclosure walls built to withstand hostilities, or at least create such an image, are structures that can be considered expressions of power, or a will to influence and extend control over lands and their inhabitants.[4] Analysis of the fortified sites from this perspective opens a path to study the political situation in particular parts of the Middle Nile Valley. In this context, my main research questions were: who erected the defences and why?

Between the 3rd Cataract and the confluence of the White Nile and the Blue Nile there are more than 300 such sites and new (previously unknown) ones are being reported and recorded every few years. These fortifications were diverse, and some were the largest structures ever built in the region (Figure 1). The defences have various layouts and have been built using diverse construction techniques and materials. In most cases, their chronology is only superficially understood and includes long periods covering sometimes hundreds of years. Many sites have not been systematically documented and lacked detailed analysis. However, already at this point, it can be said that most of the 300+ sites were built in the medieval or post-medieval period, while a few are earlier, with the oldest being Kerma period. In my research, I analysed available literature and archival data; however, my studies are generally based on new information collected during extensive archaeological surveys and excavations on selected fortified sites.

In this large assemblage of more than 300 places, a group of 34 fortified sites can be dated to a wide timespan between the 2nd and 7th century AD; that is, the period between the decline of Meroe and the rise of the medieval kingdoms (Figure 2). In my PhD thesis (Drzewiecki 2016), I divided these fortified sites

[1] See Kirwan 2002 for the collection of the publications concerning the issue in question.
[2] Upper Nubia is here understood as the land between the 3rd Cataract region (borderland in medieval and post-medieval times) and the Lower Blue Nile (the southernmost extent of Old Nubian language in the valley).
[3] See Eide *et al.* 1998 (*Fontes Historiae Nubiorum* vol. 3) for the texts, translations and comments.
[4] For more on the approach, see Johnson 2002.

Drzewiecki, M. 2024. [Insert DOI number]

Figure 1. A well-preserved stone fortified site at Marakul in the 3rd Cataract region, view from the East (photo Mariusz Drzewiecki).

into four types. Type 4 are a few quadrilateral stone enclosures erected in the Bayuda and are associated with routes crossing the desert (Drzewiecki and Cedro 2022, 17-20). Types 1 and 3 are mainly located in the Nile Valley between the 3rd and 5th Cataracts, and these are Makurian fortifications (Drzewiecki and Cedro 2022, 5-11, 15-17). They are various in size with the largest located at Old Dongola, large sites in the Southern Dongola Reach, and medium as well as small forts erected in the cataract zones (3rd, 4th and 5th). Often adapted to local topography, they are built from locally available materials. The list of enclosures in every type is far from being complete. Future research will bring more information, especially in the 5th Cataract region which is the least known.

Among the many fortified sites created at that time, one group stands out (Type 2). It consists of nine quadrilateral enclosures (Figure 3) similar to small forts built across the Roman Empire (Drzewiecki 2020, Drzewiecki and Cedro 2022: 11-15). They were erected between the 4th Cataract and the confluence of the Niles (see Figure 2), a section of the valley which was never under Roman authority. Similar in layout were temporary Roman army camps built in Lower Nubia during the siege of Qasr Ibrim and at Mirgissa in the 1st century BC (Welsby 1996, 68-69). Regular Roman forts comparable to the Middle Nile forts are located in the Egyptian Eastern Desert with the closest being on the coast of the Red Sea in Wadi Kalalat (approx. 7 km south of the port of Berenike). There are two forts at the mouth of Wadi Kalalat, a larger (approx. 1ha) and a smaller (approx. 0.25ha) to secure the sources of freshwater (Sidebotham *et al.* 2000; Haeckl 2007). The Middle Nile forts are also of similar sizes with the largest at Hosh el-Kab enclosing approx. 0.8ha (Figure 4) and the smallest at Wad Mukhtar with a quarter of that area. However, all the Middle Nile

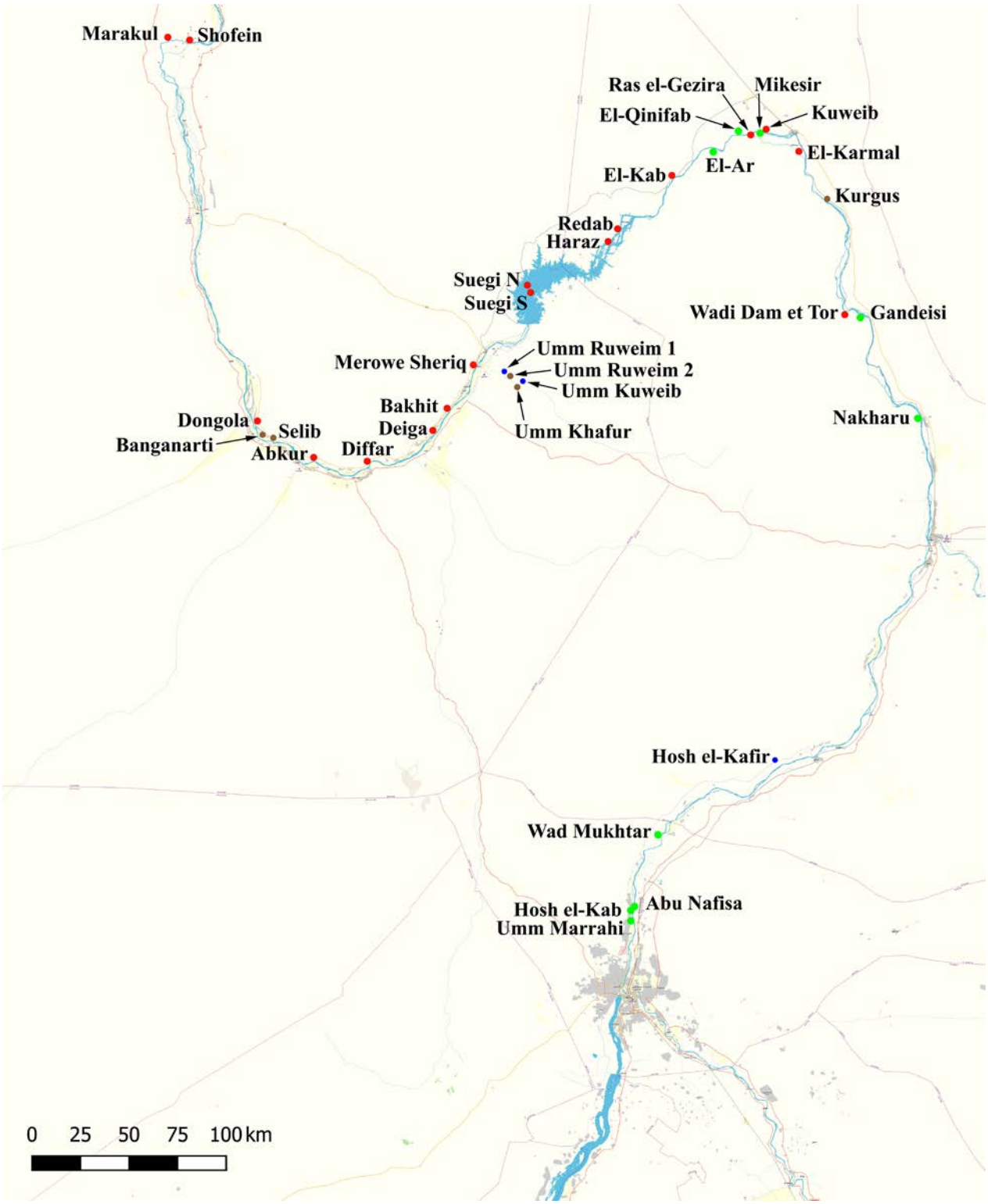

Figure 2. Map of Upper Nubia showing the location of identified fortified sites: Type 1 - red, Type 2 - green, Type 3 - brown, and Type 4 - blue (prepared by Mariusz Drzewiecki, background image Open Street Map).

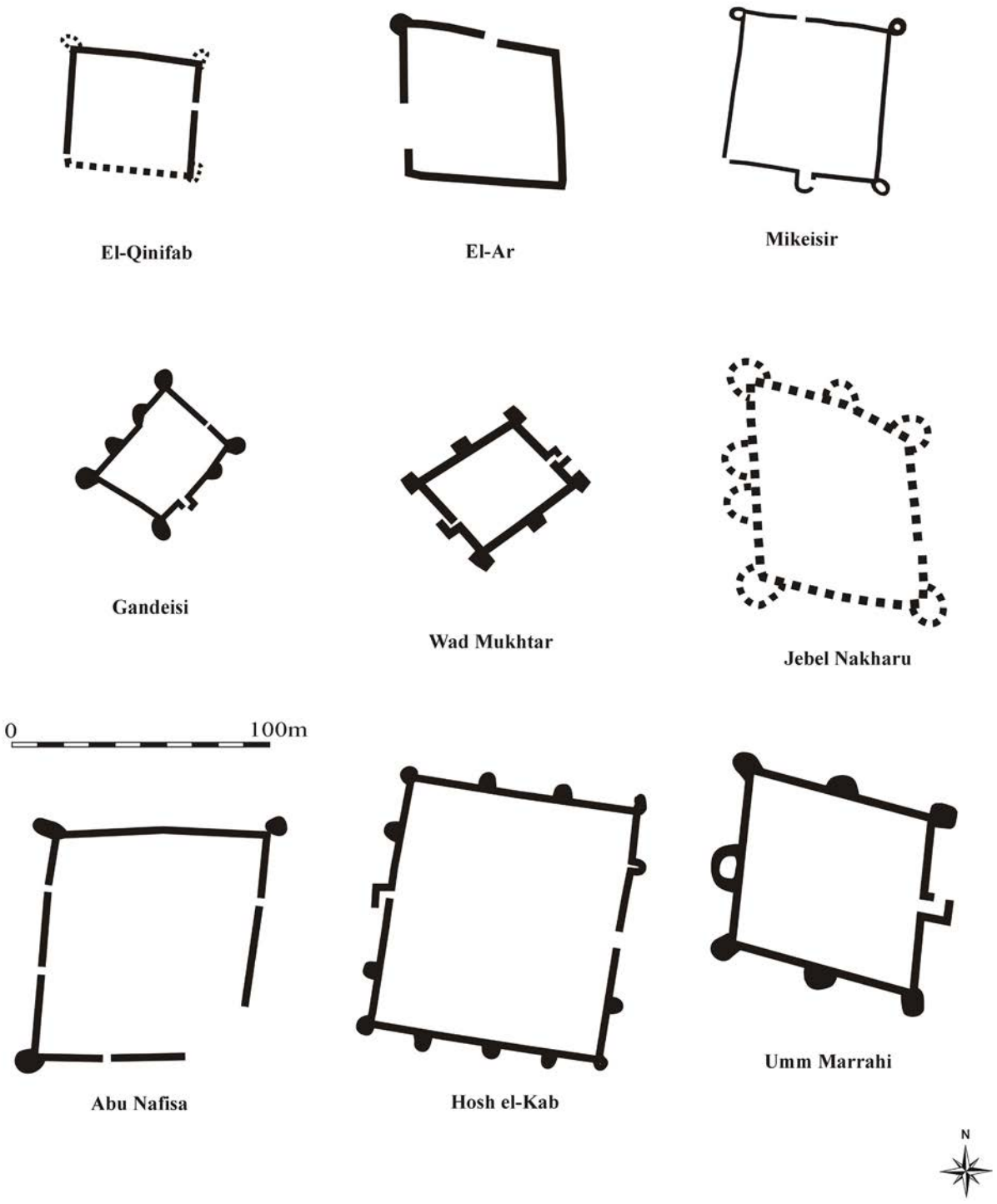

Figure 3. Layout and size of the forts (prepared by Mariusz Drzewiecki).

forts were located in territories abundant with water, near the river so they probably served a different function than the Eastern Desert Roman defences.

In the Middle Nile forts, the enclosing walls were topped with parapet walks and overall the curtains were relatively low (see for example Umm Marrahi - El-Hassan 2006, 32 and Gandeisi - Crawford 1953a, fig. 8). In Umm Marrahi and Nakhara, both located on rocky hilltops, the current height of the curtains and the amount of fallen rubble suggested that the walls were not higher than approx. 4m. In most of the Middle Nile forts, the corners were reinforced with bastions. In some forts, bastions were also included in longer curtains. Usually, there were one or two gates. In later cases, one was located on the riverside

Figure 4. Hosh el-Kab cut by large irrigation channel, view from north (photo Mariusz Drzewiecki).

and one opened on the desert. There are a few examples where gates had the additional protection of L-bend walls protruding from a curtain (Figure 5). Some of the Middle Nile forts were built using a vertical masonry technique (Figure 6). This technique was not however recorded in Makurian defences (Type 1 and 3) nor Roman forts in the Eastern Desert. However, such a construction technique is known from much older defences in Nubia, dated to the Kushite period (for example, Gala Abu Ahmed and el-Hosh, see Welsby 2005, fig. 6).

The Roman forts in Wadi Kalalat as well as other such sites in the Egyptian Eastern Desert were built between the 1st and 4rd century AD (Sidebotham *et al.* 2000; Haeckl 2007). During that time, the Middle Nile was still under Meroitic rule. A few researchers suggested that at least some forts in Upper Nubia might have been built during the Meroitic period (Crawford 1953a, 39; Hakem 1979, 155; Welsby 1996, 50; El-Hassan 2006; Drzewiecki 2013, 156-157; 2016, 77). In particular, the two sites of Umm Marrahi and Nahara have for a long time been the best recognised forts from the entire group.

The nine sites discussed here are distributed throughout the Nile Valley between the Fourth Cataract and the confluence of the Niles (see Figure 2). They cover the northern and southern river approaches to the centres of the Meroitic kingdom located in the Butana Region. This location, together with similarities to Roman forts dated to the 1st–4th century AD, may suggest that the Middle Nile forts were built by the Meroitic authorities. In this hypothesis, the construction of the forts would date before the 4th century AD and might have been an effort by Meroitic rulers to secure the heartlands of their kingdom.

However, other researchers have suggested a medieval chronology of the forts based mostly on pottery collected from the surface of the sites (Edwards 1989; Welsby 2014). In this hypothesis, the forts were

Figure 5. Umm Marrahi, aerial view, 2018 (photo Mariusz Drzewiecki).

Figure 6. Mikeisir, vertical masonry (photo Marta Błażejewska).

commissioned by rulers from Soba and/or Dongola after the 4th century AD, when Makuria and Alwa were taking control of the Middle Nile. The issue with this hypothesis is that the area where the forts can be found, upriver from the 4th Cataract, was a meeting place for Makurian and Alwan influences and it is difficult to say which authority was behind the construction of this quite regular group of forts. In addition, the distance between the northernmost fort at El-Ar and the southernmost at Jebel Umm Marrahi is approx. 550km so representing a long section of the Nile. Derek Welsby (2014, fig. 5) suggested that Hagar el-Merwa and a nearby fortification at Kurgus were traditional sites used by the medieval authorities as a border between Makuria and Alwa. However, the forts can be found to the north as well as to the south of that point, thus making the issue of the border between the kingdoms a more complex subject.

A third hypothesis can also be put forward. Some forts (Umm Marrahi and Nahara) might have been erected by the Meroitic authorities but in subsequent centuries, after changes in the political situation they continued in use while new similar structures were built.

In conclusion, there are at least three possible answers to the question of who created the defences: all forts were built by Meroitic authorities; some forts were built by Meroitic authorities and subsequently were used and expanded by Makuria/Alwa; or only Makurian/Alwan states developed the network of forts. In my opinion, to find a solution to this puzzle, new data has to be obtained to narrow down the chronology of the forts. If the forts had been built before the 4th century AD, then the involvement of Meroitic authorities could be considered. However, if the dates fall after the 4th century AD, then medieval states were more likely to be involved in the forts' construction. Solving this issue will bring us closer to understanding why the forts were built.

The best place, in my opinion, for chronological investigations is where the forts cluster. The three southernmost forts were built a short distance from each other: Abu Nafisa was only 500m from Hosh el-Kab while Umm Marrahi, considered by some researchers as a Meroitic enclosure, was constructed at the top of a hill located approx. 3.5km south of Hosh el-Kab (Figure 7). All three forts are within eye-sight of each other. They are located on the northern outskirts of Omdurman and thus are called Forts of North Omdurman.

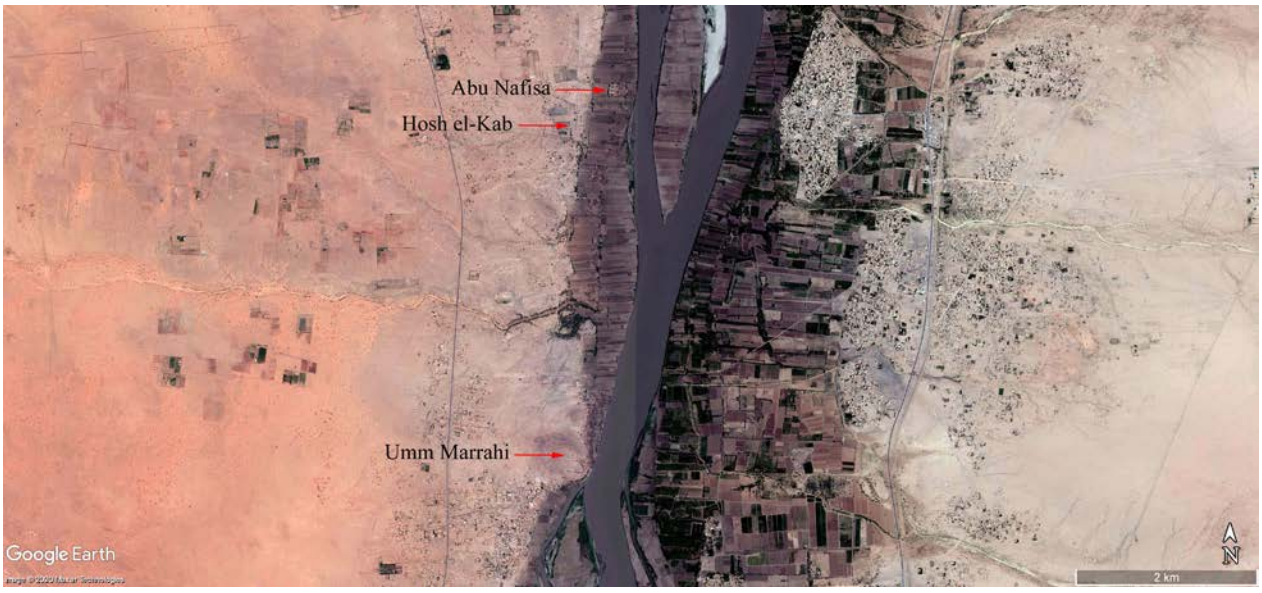

Figure 7. Location of the cluster of three forts (Google Earth).

Forts of North Omdurman - survey and excavations

The three forts are located on the left bank of the Nile between Sheikh el-Tayeb in the south (a village known for its Sufi school *Tarika Taibiyya*) and Shaheinab in the north (a hamlet known to most archaeologists from Arkell's excavations in 1949-1950 - see Arkell 1953). In 2011, 2012, and 2018, we mapped the forts and conducted archaeological surveys in the surrounding area (between the two villages) discovering large tumuli cemeteries, extensive prehistoric settlements, and cemeteries as well as Funj period settlement sites.[5] Jebel Umm Marrahi is a dominating natural feature in this relatively flat region with a commanding view from its flat hilltop. On clear days, the land between Sabaloka in the north and the confluence of the Niles in the south can be observed from Jebel Umm Marrahi (visibility covering an area of approx. 30km in each direction). In addition, the hill itself is a source of stone with numerous modern and old quarries scattered on the plateau and slopes.

Jebel Umm Marrahi was settled in the past, and is visible from the area of the archaeological sites recorded during our surveys. The hill's plateau was already settled during the Early Holocene period and later during the Late Antique and Funj periods people returned to this place. In the Mahdiyya period, the hill was used both by the Sudanese and Egyptian-British troops. The hill was again a place of military activities during the Second World War when anti-aircraft guns were placed there to protect the nearby airport at Wadi Sayyidna. Currently, followers of *Tarika Taibiyya* often visit the hill's plateau for prayer and contemplation. All stone structures visible inside the fort were built by such visitors during the last two centuries (Figure 8).

The hill also attracted the attention of archaeologists working in the area. Crawford surveyed Umm Marrahi in 1951-1952 and proposed a Meroitic (4th century BC-4th century AD) chronology for the fort (Crawford 1953a, 39-40; Crawford 1953b, 29). A test excavation was subsequently carried out by a team from the University of Khartoum in 1977-1978 (El-Hassan 2006, 17). The architectural remains on the top of the hill and a tumuli cemetery at its bottom were investigated at this time. Pottery in the fort was, according to the Khartoum team, similar to that discovered during excavations of the cemetery. Both the cemetery and the defences on top were dated to between AD325 and 650 (El-Hassan 2006, 32). Radiocarbon dating carried out on one sample from the cemetery (Grave 18) provided a date 1200 ± 70 BP (lab no. HAR-2713, cal. AD 675-986 at 95.4% date calibrated using OxCal v.4.4 and the IntCal20 calibration curve). The excavators interpreted this date as setting the final phase of the cemetery, but it did not provide much clarity as to the chronology of the fort. In the 1980s, the top of Jebel Umm Marrahi was the location for research into the prehistoric settlement, with excavations undertaken in the southern part of the plateau (El-Amin and Mohammed-Ali 2004).

The two other forts (Hosh el-Kab and Abu Nafisa) have not seen regular research, although their chronology has been briefly discussed by a few researchers. Patrice Lenoble (2006, 195) suggested that Hosh el-Kab had analogies with the Late Meroitic enclosure at Hosh el-Kafir, while Mahmoud el-Tayeb (1995, fig. 30) included it in his thesis on the genesis of the Kingdom of Makuria. Derek Welsby (2014, 188-190) has suggested an early medieval date for both sites.

In 2018, we conducted fieldwork in all three forts. Our methodology was the same for each site (Drzewiecki and Cedro 2022, 30-46). During the fieldwork, non-invasive and invasive methods were implemented, including geophysical survey, archaeological survey and excavations. A significant number

[5] For more information on archaeological sites recorded during the survey see: Polkowski 2011; Rączkowski 2012; Drzewiecki and Polkowski 2016, 87-89; Rączkowski 2018; Drzewiecki *et al.* 2018, 137-140; Drzewiecki *et al.* 2019, 21-26; Drzewiecki 2023, 43-49. In 2018, a reconnaissance focusing on oral histories and traditions related to the archaeological sites was conducted by Elmontaser Dafaalla Elmoubark in the first season (Drzewiecki *et al.* 2018, 131-132) and Selma Ali Ahmed in the second season (Ahmed 2019).

Figure 8. Umm Marrahi, view from the north (photo Mariusz Drzewiecki).

of small finds and samples were collected, which, after detailed analysis, provided information about the date of construction and added information on how the first inhabitants lived.

We conducted a detailed topographical survey using a combination of aerial photography and ground control points measured with a Total Station to generate digital elevation models and orthomosaics of the entire enclosures. Aneta Cedro conducted a pottery surface survey to establish types and their distribution in the forts and their close vicinity. A magnetic geophysical survey was conducted by Robert Ryndziewicz in all the available parts of each fort (Ryndziewicz and Drzewiecki 2018; 2019). Finally, targeted small-scale excavations were opened in all forts. We placed the trenches in the corners and gates of the forts to establish the sequence of phases and detect potential changes and modifications to the defensive architecture. Additionally, we cleared recently damaged parts of the walls to document cross-sections.

To narrow down the date of construction of the forts, we wanted to obtain sample materials from the first phase of settlement in each fort (*terminus ante quem* for the construction of the fort), check if there are traces of occupation before the construction of the defences (*terminus post quem*) and investigate the structure of the defensive walls to search for dating samples in the construction materials.

Hosh el-Kab

We decided to start our excavations in Hosh el-Kab, since the fort was badly damaged in 2014 when a large irrigation channel perpendicular to the Nile cut the site from north to south (see Figure 4). The agricultural project was stopped by NCAM but it did not change the fact that the area had been undergoing rapid changes in the 2010s due to the proximity of Omdurman.

Hosh el-Kab is the largest fort, measuring approx. 94x87m (Figure 9). The fort's walls were built from irregular stones bounded with mud mortar. The enclosure was erected in a single stage; however, some modifications/repairs were identified in the desert gate. In 2018, the curtain walls were preserved to 0.7m

in height. We did not find any remains of settlement preceding the construction of defences, nor organic materials suitable for dating in the uncovered sections of the walls. However, some dating materials were identified in the lowest layer, at the level of the fort's foundation.

Remains of mud brick architecture inside the fort were identified during the geophysical survey (Figure 10). The mud brick walls created regular units abutting the curtains. In one of the trenches, we were able to observe that the mud-brick structures were built in the first phase of the fort. Additionally, traces of free-standing buildings in the fort were recorded during the geophysical survey, while on the surface there was only one visible concentration of stones, red-brick debris and fragments of white plaster[6] associated with Early Christian pottery, perhaps indicating the location of a small church. In the northwest corner of the fort, remains of an open mosque outlined by a single line of stone associated with Funj and modern pottery were visible on the surface. Smaller stone structures, again associated with Funj and modern pottery, were also identified in the southern part of the enclosure.

In all three forts, small finds were mostly pottery sherds and faunal remains. In the lowest layer at Hosh el-Kab, we recorded post-Meroitic sherds. On the surface of the fort, we recorded a few Early Christian fragments as well as larger quantities of Funj and modern ceramics. When it comes to faunal remains from the first layers, in all three forts the dominating species were sheep/goat, with cattle very limited. Preserved bone fragments were post-consumption remains. Marta Osypińska (2022) noted that there was little variation in the types of meat available for the people living in the forts, and that this was mostly the cheaper cuts of meat, suggesting the inhabitants' low status. Remains of wild animals found in the forts suggest stronger ties with the river environment than the desert.

Abu Nafisa

Abu Nafisa is the second-largest fort, measuring approx. 86x84m (Figure 11). The name derives from a holy man who lived among the ruins sometime during the Funj period. The fort is located closer to the river and is less well-preserved than Hosh el-Kab. Based on the results of the magnetic survey, Robert Ryndziewicz suggested that the large volumes of alluvial soil deposited inside and outside the fort indicated that it flooded at least once.

All preserved parts of the enclosure wall at Abu Nafisa were built using vertical masonry. In Type 2 forts, this is quite common. It was identified in El-Qinifab (Baker and Schellinger 2017, 174) and in the first phase at El-Ar (subsequently overbuilt with stones laid horizontally, see Żurawski 2010, 202-203). Gandeisi fort was also similar (Crawford 1953a, 30). At Mikeisir vertical masonry is clearly visible; however, this was a single-stage fortification, which was abandoned in the early medieval period.[7]

Abu Nafisa is badly eroded and only the lowest row of the stone foundation is preserved. No organic materials suitable for dating were detected in the uncovered sections of the enclosure wall. Under the fort's foundation level, there were remains of a fireplace. Based on stratigraphic observations, the fireplace is older than the construction of the fort. As a result, for Abu Nafisa, we were able to obtain materials for *terminus ante quem* and *terminus post quem* dating. From both phases, we had post-Meroitic pottery and a few beads. We did not record Early Christian materials in the fort; however, Funj and modern ceramics were present, especially around the grave of Abu Nafisa.

Umm Marrahi

Umm Marrahi was the only fort in a commanding location. It was set on a plateau topping the only hill in the area. All stone features inside the fort are the work of the Sufi followers who have been visiting the

[6] For details on white plaster analysis see Zielińska *et al.* 2022.

[7] Mikeisir is the fort for which there are radiocarbon dates. A German team directed by Claudia Näser obtained seven radiocarbon dates for various settlement layers inside Mikeisir fort (Rees, Lahitte and Näser 2015).

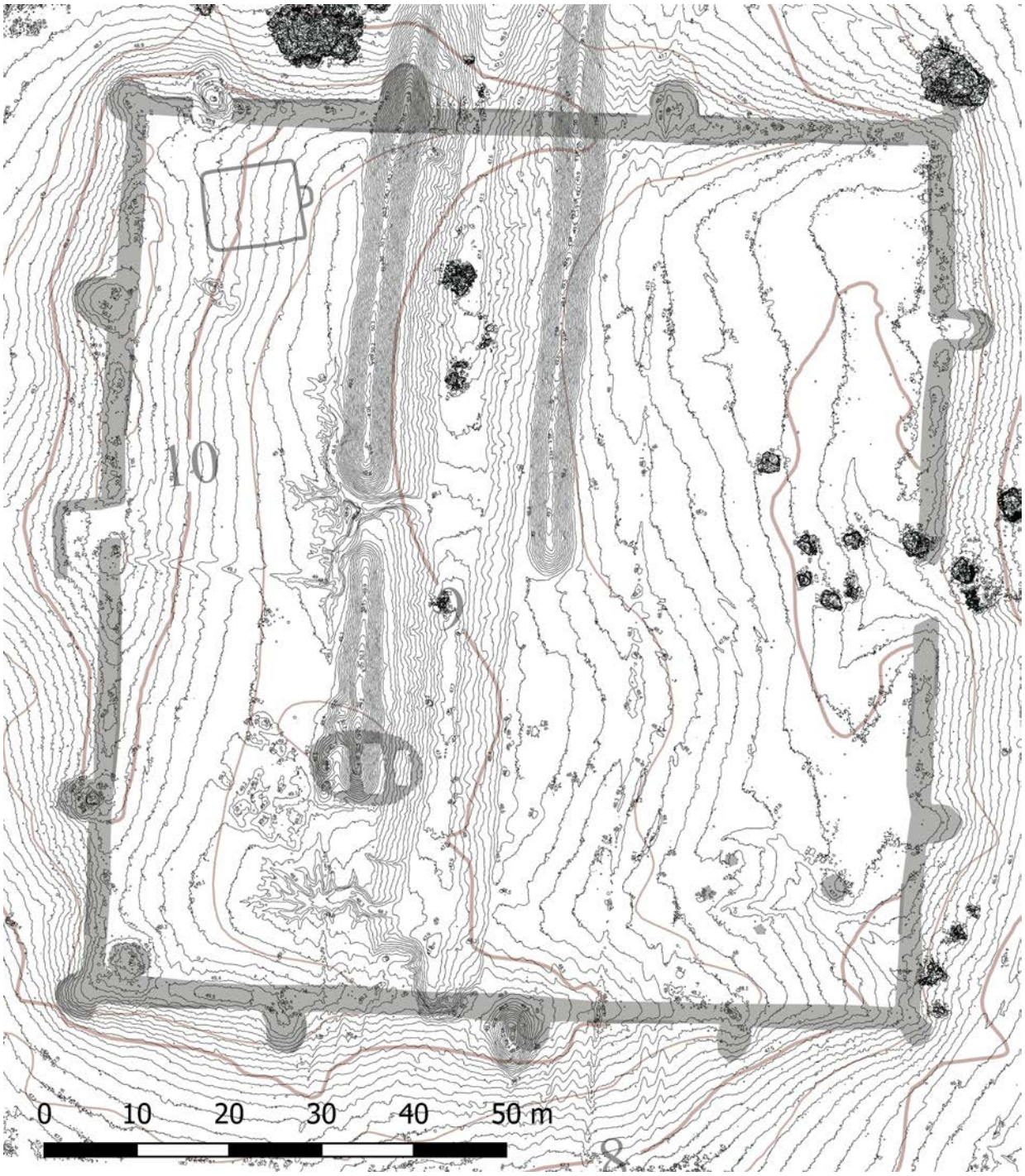

Figure 9. Hosh el-Kab, plan of the fort from 2011 overlaid with a contour map made in 2018 (prepared by Mariusz Drzewiecki).

plateau for contemplation and to receive *baraka* (Drzewiecki 2019). The stone structures erected around the fort - the southern enclosure and the western wall, were erected in the Mahdiyya period (Figure 12).

A pottery surface survey covered the entire plateau. Aneta Cedro found numerous sherds of Early Holocene pottery. It is worth noting that no Meroitic materials were found here. Post-Meroitic and Early Christian ceramics covered the fort and its surroundings (particularly to the south), while Funj pottery could be found scattered on the entire plateau.

The magnetic survey confirmed that under the thin layer of accumulated sand in the central part of the fort, there are no older features, only bedrock. We opened two trenches and selected three locations

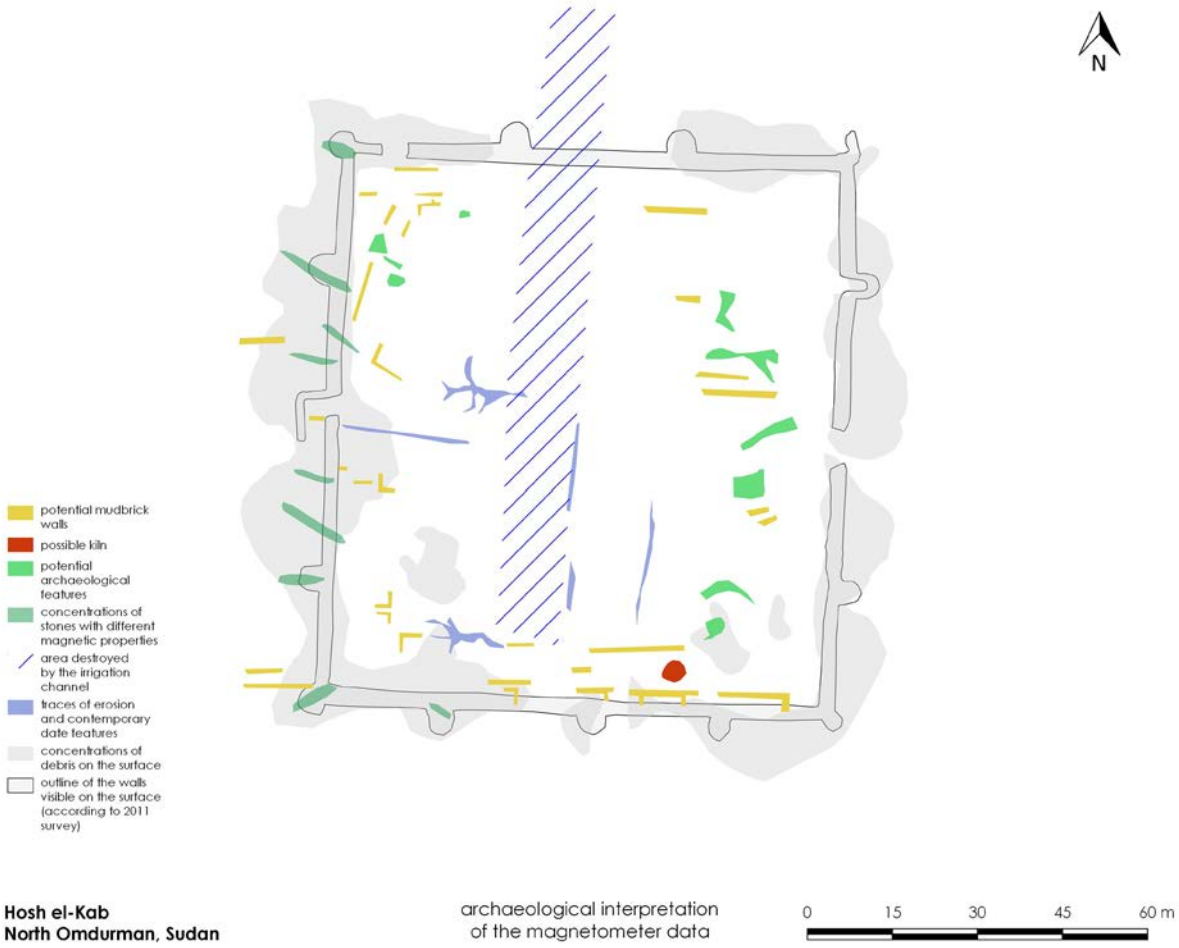

Figure 10. Hosh el-Kab, underground archaeological features traced by the magnetic survey (prepared by Robert Ryndziewicz).

for surface cleaning to understand better the structure of the enclosure wall. Our trenches cut the debris and accumulated layers against the curtain walls. We observed that the lowest settlement layers were sealed by stones falling from eroding defences. In the layers under the debris, we found large quantities of pottery sherds dated to the post-Meroitic period as well as a few Early Christian pieces. Umm Marrahi constituted the largest collection of pottery obtained from the forts. This collection reflects the typical repertoire of vessels discovered in all three forts. The assemblage consisted mainly of small and medium-sized polished or burnished bowls (Figure 13), coarse ware bowls and *dokat* (Figure 14) as well as post-Meroitic storage containers (Figure 15). There were no imports such as amphorae as well as no luxury goods such as Soba Ware. All material was local and strongly resembled common pottery from Soba. It seems that we were finding strictly utilitarian wares.

To sum up, all the forts are quite homogeneous in terms of size, layout and finds. In the magnetic survey and excavations, we recorded regular units made of mud brick abutting the walls in Hosh el-Kab. At Abu Nafisa, the state of preservation did not allow for such identifications, while at Umm Marrahi, traces of such, if they existed, have been damaged by modern stone structures inside the fort. However, similar regular units were discovered in Mikeisir (Rees, Lahitte and Näser 2015). Pottery in all three forts was similar: strictly utilitarian without luxury goods or imports. Faunal remains indicated that when meat was consumed it was mainly sheep/goat.

All this suggests that the forts were not elite residences. Artefacts found in all enclosures did not indicate the wealth of inhabitants, but were mainly everyday items. Ceramic vessels were used to store products,

Figure 11. Abu Nafisa, plan from 2011 overlayed with an orthomosaic from 2018. Area 1 and Area 2 indicate the location of archaeological trenches. The grave of Abu Nafisa is visible in the bottom right part of the

prepare meals and serve them for consumption. In addition to such items, post-consumption remains (faunal remains, the majority domesticated animals) were found. Material remains indicate uniformity and lack of complexities characteristic of civil settlements. The forts in their first phase of occupation were most likely inhabited by soldiers. However, no weapons were recorded; in Nubia such items are most often found in graves.

Chronology of the forts

Radiocarbon dates fit well with the chronology set by the small finds.[8] The oldest possible radiocarbon dates do not reach the period of Meroitic domination. We did not find any Meroitic materials during excavations nor the pottery survey in any of the three forts.

[8] Detailed description of samples, their archaeological context as well as discussion of the results is available in Drzewiecki and Cedro 2022, 117-122.

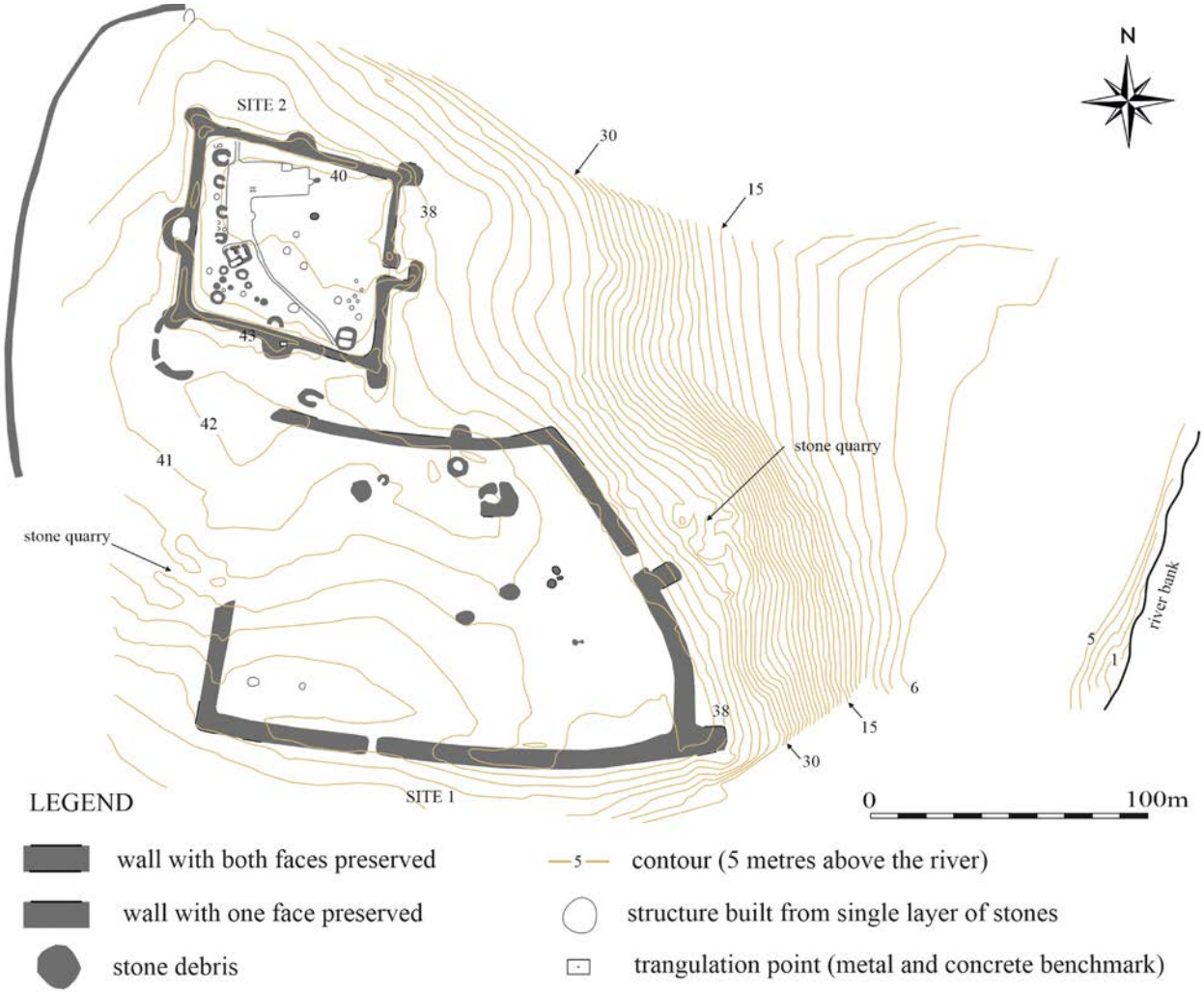

Figure 12. Umm Marrahi, stone features recorded on the plateau of the hill (prepared by Adrian Chlebowski and Mariusz Drzewiecki).

The largest set of eleven radiocarbon dates was obtained from the fort at Jebel Umm Marrahi. The first phase of settlement started between AD 536 and 641 and lasted for a relatively short time until the first half of the 7th century. The secondary occupation was in the Funj and modern periods. Similar results were obtained from four radiocarbon dates collected at Hosh el-Kab. The first phase of occupation started in the 6th century and continued into the 7th century. The fort was reoccupied in the Funj period. In Abu Nafisa, in addition to the samples from the occupation of the fort, we collected dating materials from the fireplace preceding the construction of the enclosure. This way we were able to narrow down the construction of the third fort to dates between AD 561 and 574. There was no Early Christian pottery in Abu Nafisa indicating that the site fell of out use shortly after the fort was built. However, like with the other two forts, it was resettled in the Funj period.

Sometime after our fieldwork, the region was flooded. Satellite imagery showed that Abu Nafisa was almost fully covered with water while nearby Hosh el-Kab remained intact due to its position on slightly elevated land (Figure 16). It looked as if the people who erected Hosh el-Kab knew exactly what the range of a high tide was going to be. In my opinion, they might have learned it the hard way, when their first fort (Abu Nafisa) was damaged by floodwater. Abu Nafisa and Hosh el-Kab constitute the two largest forts from the entire assemblage of known Middle Nile forts (Type 2). The lack of Early Christian pottery in Abu Nafisa also indicates that the fort was abandoned while Hosh el-Kab was still in use. If that is correct, then

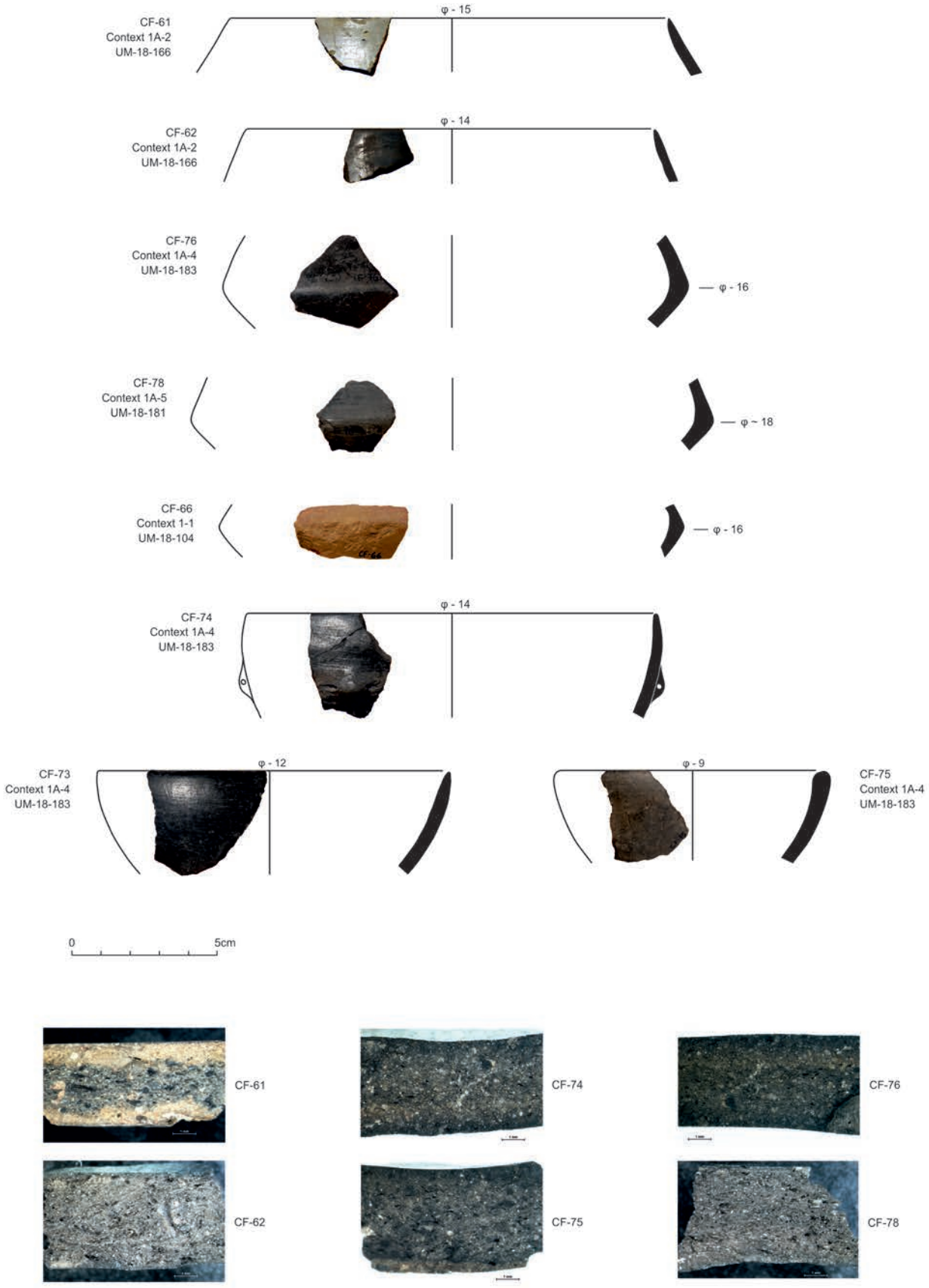

Figure 13. Post-Meroitic bowls from Umm Marrahi (photos and drawings by Aneta Cedro).

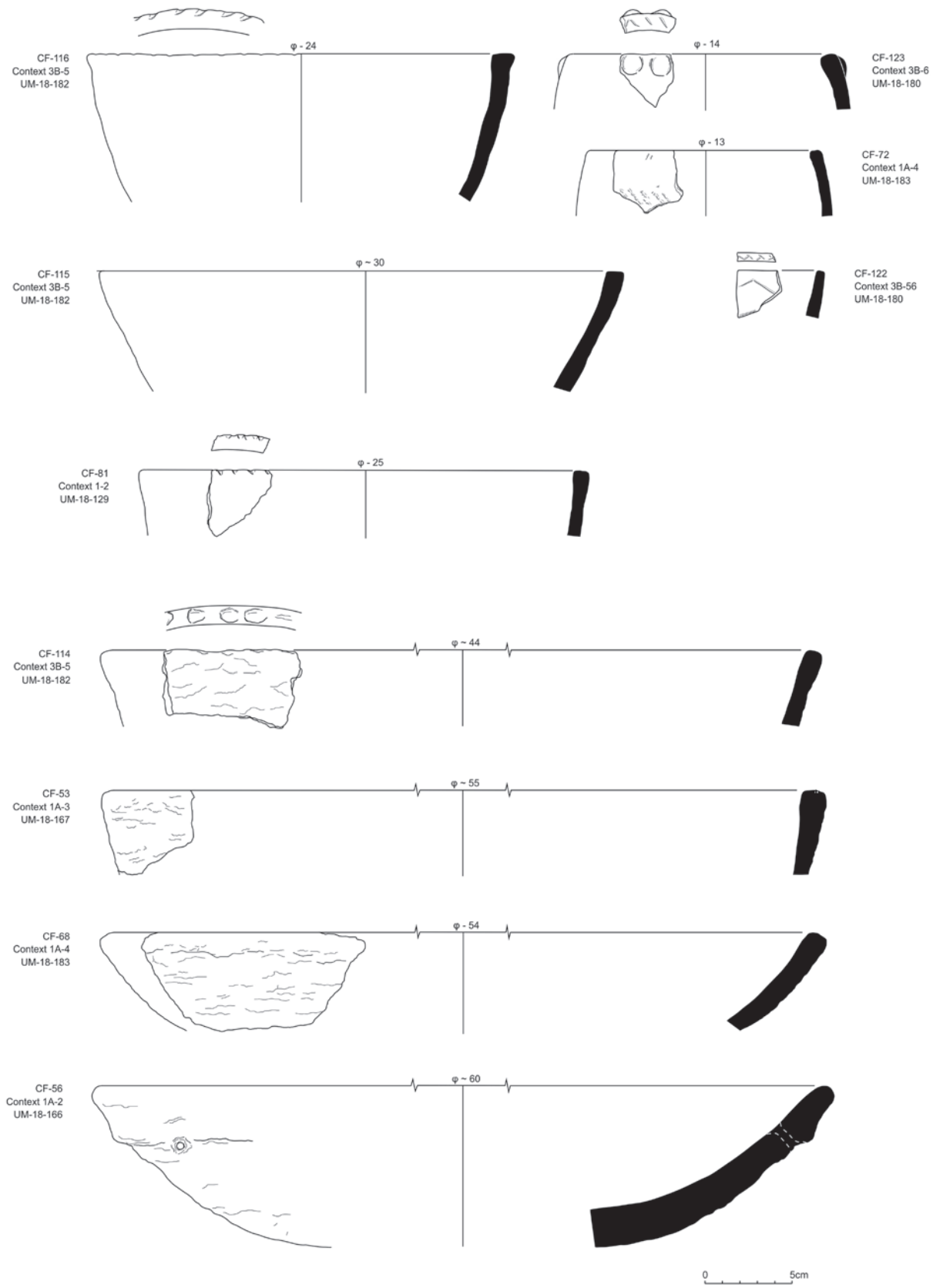

Figure 14. Coarse ware bowls and *dokat* from Umm Marrahi (drawings by Aneta Cedro).

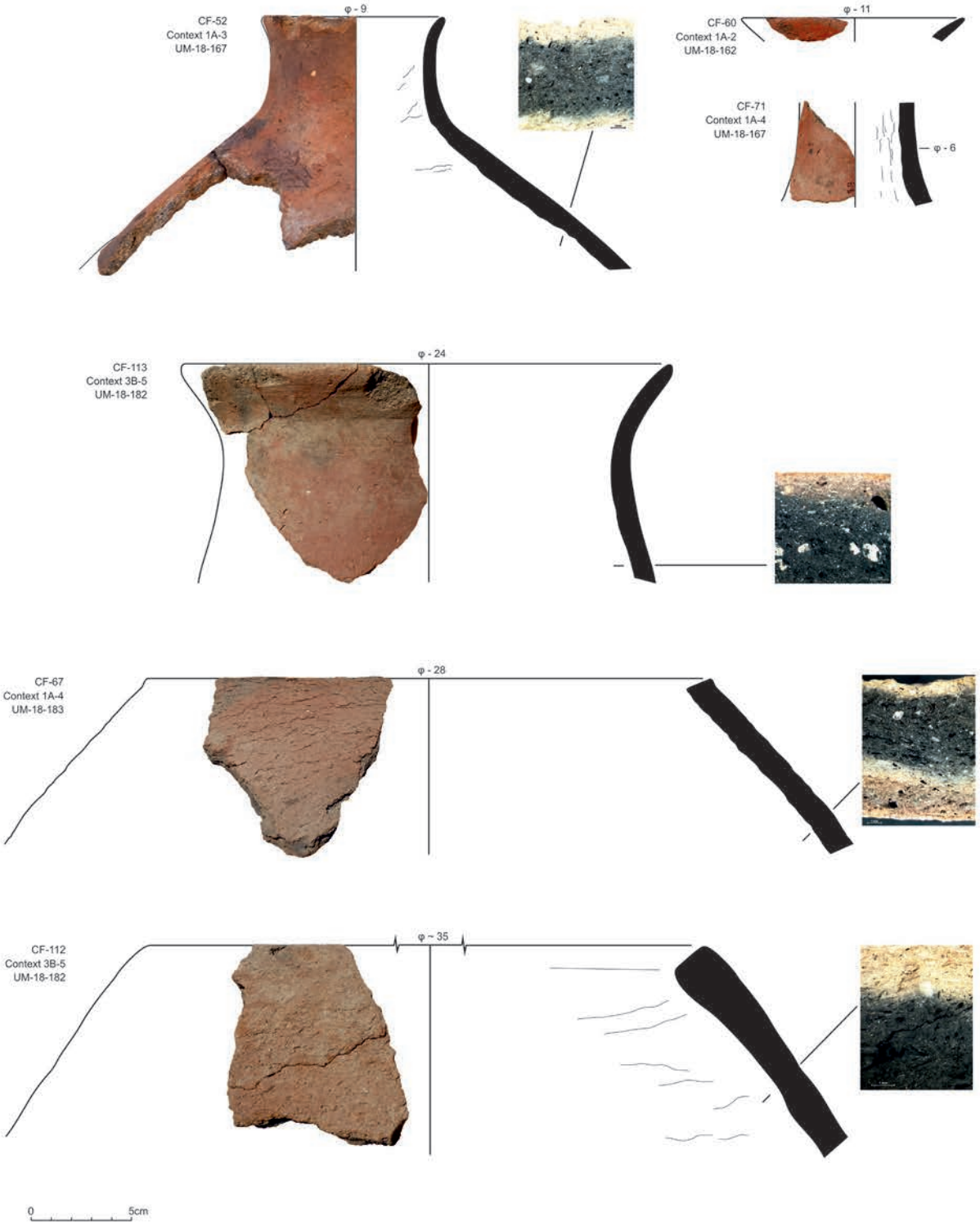

Figure 15. Post-Meroitic storage containers from Umm Marrahi (photos and drawings by Aneta Cedro).

Figure 16. Abu Nafisa and Hosh el-Kab during the flood of 2019 (Google Earth).

Hosh el-Kab was built sometime in the 560s or 570s.

Jebel Umm Marrahi was safe from floods, but was it already standing when water damaged Abu Nafisa in the 560s or 570s? If the residents of Umm Marrahi lived in the area for a longer time, then they would know about local floods and maybe the selection of a place for Abu Nafisa fort was considered more fortunate. In my opinion, Abu Nafisa was the first fortified site in that area. After it was damaged a smaller fort at the top of the hill might have been built to secure the area and the construction of a large fort at Hosh el-Kab was initiated. It seems that during the second half of the 6th century, the region was not secure, and it was a place of strategic importance. This changed during the mid-7th century when the two still-standing forts were deserted.

Forts as remnants of a land dispute between Alwa and Makuria

Built by the army and used by soldiers, these defences are probably the material remnants of a conflict. During the second part of the 6th century, the rulers of Alwa were baptised into the Christian faith and in the description of this event, we hear about hostilities between Makuria and Alwa as well as an alliance between Alwa and Nobadia against Makuria. The events are briefly mentioned by John of Ephesus (Vantini 1975, 6-26). Speculations on the reasons, development, and outcomes of the conflict can be based on the distribution of the fortified sites.

Little is known about the territorial development of early Alwa and the challenges faced by its rulers. If the group of forts (Type 2) were built by the Alwan rulers while Type 1 and 3 fortified sites by Makurian authorities, then the following observations can be made.

In the 6th century, the Alwan authorities erected forts as far north as the Abu Hamed Reach (see Figure 2). All were built using vertical masonry. At the same time, Makurian authorities were reinforcing the downriver end of the Fourth Cataract with two large and irregular fortified sites at Suegi (Godlewski 2005, fig. 1). They were located on opposite banks at a strategic place where the Nile flows through a single channel (Wiewióra 2007, 209-212).

Makuria was slowly taking hold of lands upriver from Suegi and building new fortifications a short distance from each other, creating a network of points connected by the river. Some of the Alwan forts were reused by Makurian authorities; for example, El-Ar, which was modified and used over the next few centuries (Żurawski 2010, 202-203). Other Alwan forts were abandoned like Mikesir on Mograt Island. The

largest island on the Nile was, however, clearly of interest to Makurian authorities since other defences were built to secure this part of the Great Bend of the Nile (Ras el-Gezira, Karmel and Kuweib).

The Fifth Cataract situation could have been similar, since both Makurian and Alwan type defences have been recorded. However, more detailed research is needed.

The southernmost Alwan forts were not taken by the Makurian authorities and there are no Type 1 and 3 fortified sites in the area. The Makurian slow march probably stopped somewhere in the Fifth Cataract Region. However, the confluence of the Niles required security, and a threat was clearly perceived, since defences in this area were so swiftly rebuilt after the high flood. Sometime in the mid-7th century AD, something happened and forts as well as many Makurian defences in the Fourth Cataract Region were abandoned. The conflict between the two kingdoms was somehow resolved or put on hold. Maybe because a new force came into the political stage - the Arab army invading Nubia from the north? Or maybe a peaceful solution was reached? Further studies into the fortified sites in the region will bring new insights into the political situation and open paths into studies on the structure and development of medieval kingdoms in the initial centuries of their long history in the Middle Nile Region.

Planning long-term protection of the sites

After the end of our fieldwork, our documentation was extensively used during the UNESCO scholarships at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (supervised by Włodzimierz Rączkowski; funded by the Polish Commission for UNESCO and the University's authorities). Scholarship holders, mainly NCAM employees, prepared projects to safeguard the sites (Drzewiecki 2023, 49). A plan to create an archaeological park covering the entire Jebel Umm Marrahi was created and submitted to NCAM. The hill had concentrated human settlements since the Early Holocene (with some of the earliest examples of pottery materials recorded on site), as well as substantial architectural remains relating to important periods in the history of NE Africa. It is also still an important part of life for the communities inhabiting nearby settlements. As such a proposal was presented to NCAM to add Jebel Umm Marrahi and its surroundings to the national heritage list and to start an application process to include it on the UNESCO Tentative List.

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