

SUDAN & NUBIA

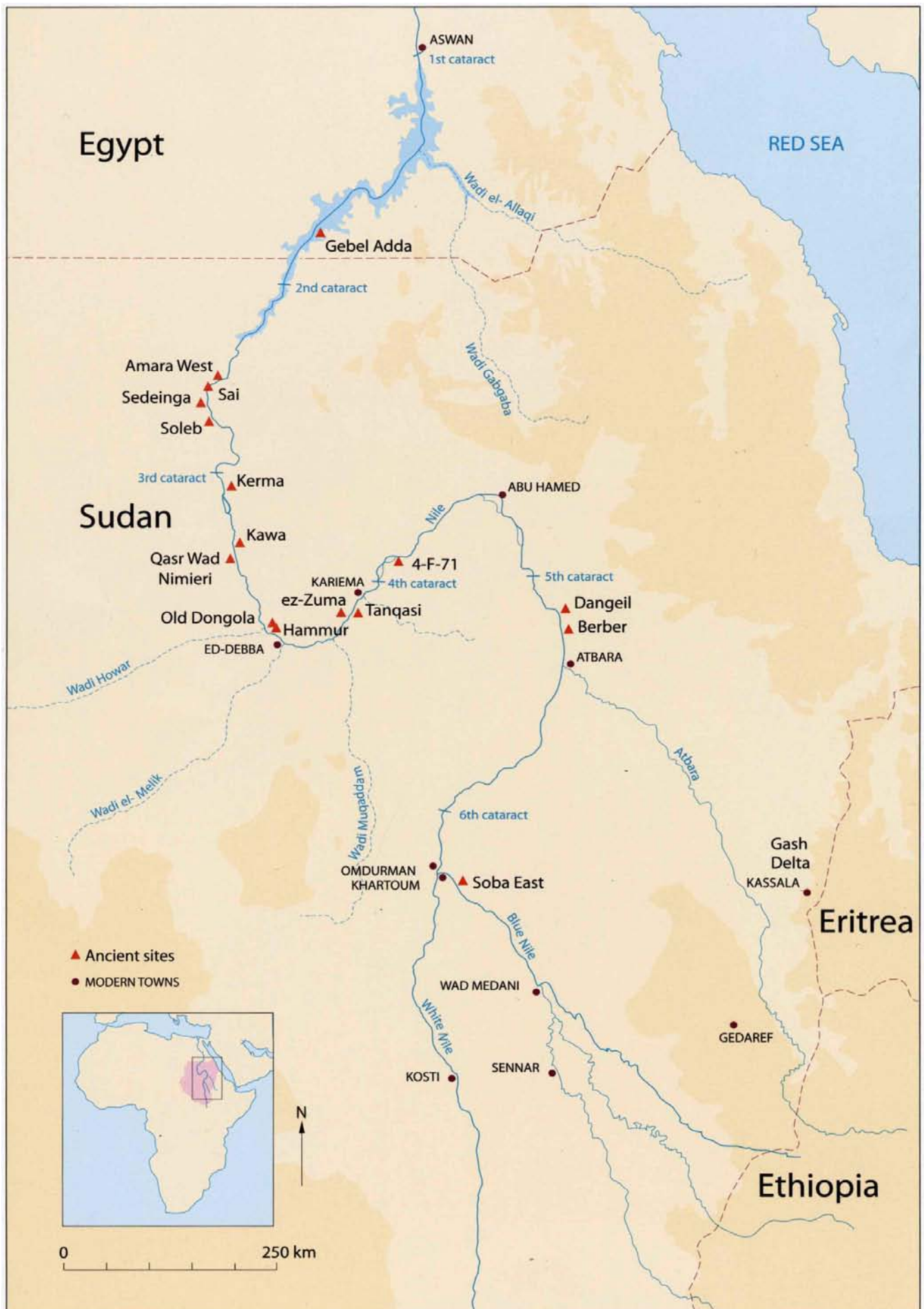
The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



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2010





Egypt

RED SEA

ASWAN
1st cataract

Gebel Adda

2nd cataract

Amara West
Sedeinga
Sai
Soleb

3rd cataract

Kerma

Sudan

Kawa
Qasr Wad
Nimieri

4-F-71

4th cataract

Old Dongola

Hammur

ED-DEBBA

KARIEMA

ez-Zuma

Tanqasi

ABU HAMED

5th cataract

Dangeil

Berber

ATBARA

Wadi Howar

Wadi el-Melik

Wadi Muqaddam

6th cataract

OMDURMAN
KHARTOUM

Soba East

Gash
Delta
KASSALA

Eritrea

- ▲ Ancient sites
- MODERN TOWNS



0 250 km

Ethiopia

SUDAN & NUBIA

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Front cover: Berber Meroitic Cemetery. Tomb, BMC 8, showing grave goods, the extended position of the skeleton and the remains of a coffin (photo: Mahmoud Suleiman Bashir).

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Qasr Wad Nimeiri and its *Qubbas*¹

Intisar Soghayroun el-Zein

Qasr Wad Nimeiri is located about 19km south of New Dongola (Dongola el-Ordi) and 470km north of Khartoum (19° 01.322' N, 30° 27.723' E). It is bordered by Sortod village to the north and Gharb Labab to the south. The area is marked on maps as Khannaq, as the low sandstone cliff which to the north is separated from the Nile by the broad plain of Dongola here reaches the Nile and forms a bottle neck (*khannaq*) which must be traversed by travellers passing along the west bank (Crawford 1951, 32). The site occupies an area more than 2km in length which is divided by a road into two sections. The eastern section includes the fort and the settlements to the north, west and south, while the western part is occupied by a huge cemetery. When Cailliaud passed the village in 1821 it lay in ruins (Cailliaud 1821, 11).

The Eastern section

The fort (Figure 1, Plate 1), referred to as a castle by Crawford (1951, 32), is a rectangular structure about 175 x 75m with six upstanding towers: two on the north and four on the western wall, some of them two storeys high (northern wall towers). It is divided into two unequal parts by an east-west wall: the northern (the smaller part) and the southern (the larger).

The northern part is in turn divided into two; a building complex and a courtyard (*hosh*) (Colour plates XXXIV and XXXVI). In the building complex are remains of houses, some 12 rooms arranged mainly along the north, east and western walls, two of them at the north end being built into the wall. They are constructed of rough stone, but one portion around the windows is of fired bricks laid in regular courses, and some of the wooden lintels over the windows are still intact. The main entrance seems to have been located at the south-east end of this part, on the eastern wall, where two large cavities are visible (Colour plate XXXV). A latrine is situated at the southern end of the western rooms' complex.

¹ The team comprised from the University of Khartoum, Intisar Soghayroun Elzein, Mohammed al Fatih Hayati, Suad 'Uthman Babiker (PhD student, who recorded the oral traditions) and Salah Mohammed 'Uthman (driver) along with the surveyors Isabella Welsby Sjöström and David Hooker.

The southern part seems to have been occupied by many people; remains of mud and mud-bricks walls are still visible but building plans are difficult to determine without excavation. The eastern fort wall has completely disappeared, only the western with two mud-brick interval towers, the south-west angle tower and the southern wall with its slightly conical tower of mud brick set in mud mortar, are still standing but in a deplorable state. Large parts of the southern wall, apparently built entirely of mud brick, have collapsed, with portions only remaining intact but liable to fall at any moment.

The fort is relatively well-preserved compared to that at

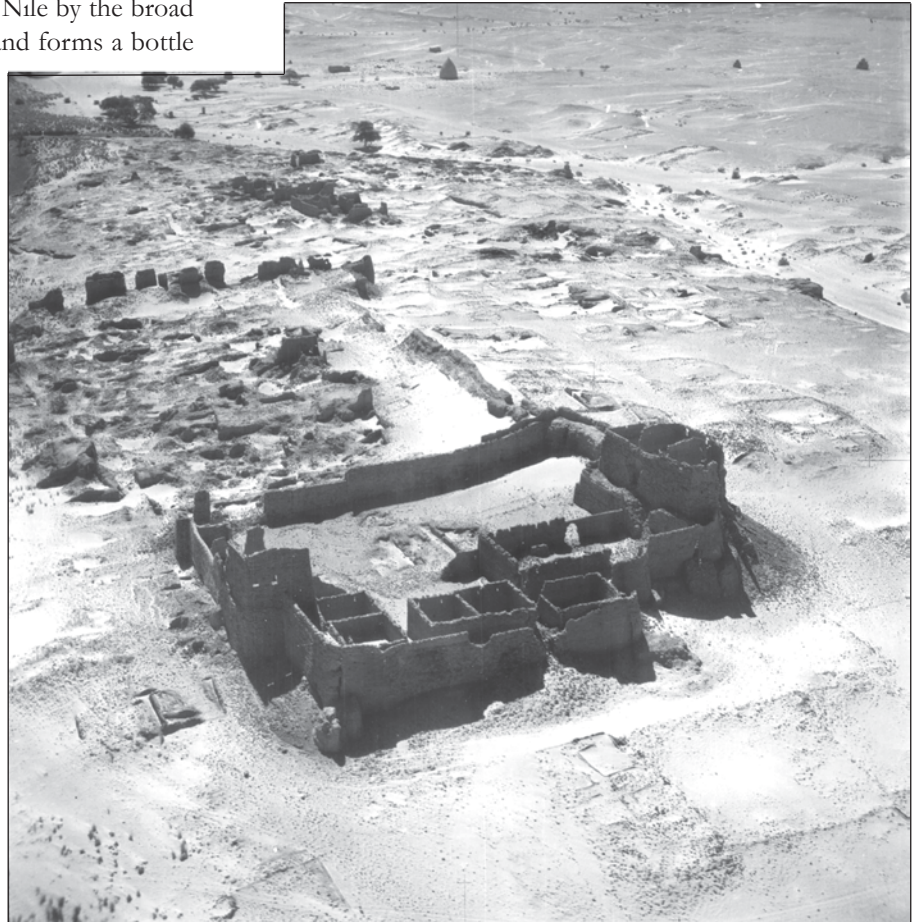


Plate 1. Aerial photograph of Qasr Wad Nimeiri taken by the RAF in the 1930s (Courtesy Institute of Archaeology, University College London).

el-Khandaq (50km to the south) due to the absence of an inhabited settlement next to it. Like el-Khandaq, it is a prominent landmark as one approaches from the north or south.

The building complexes

There are three areas of settlement. South of the fort the remains of a large village extending for a least 300m lies between the modern road and the cultivation. The rough walls of houses, which were built of stone and mud brick, are still standing in places a few metres high (Plate 2). They are mostly of rectangular plan.

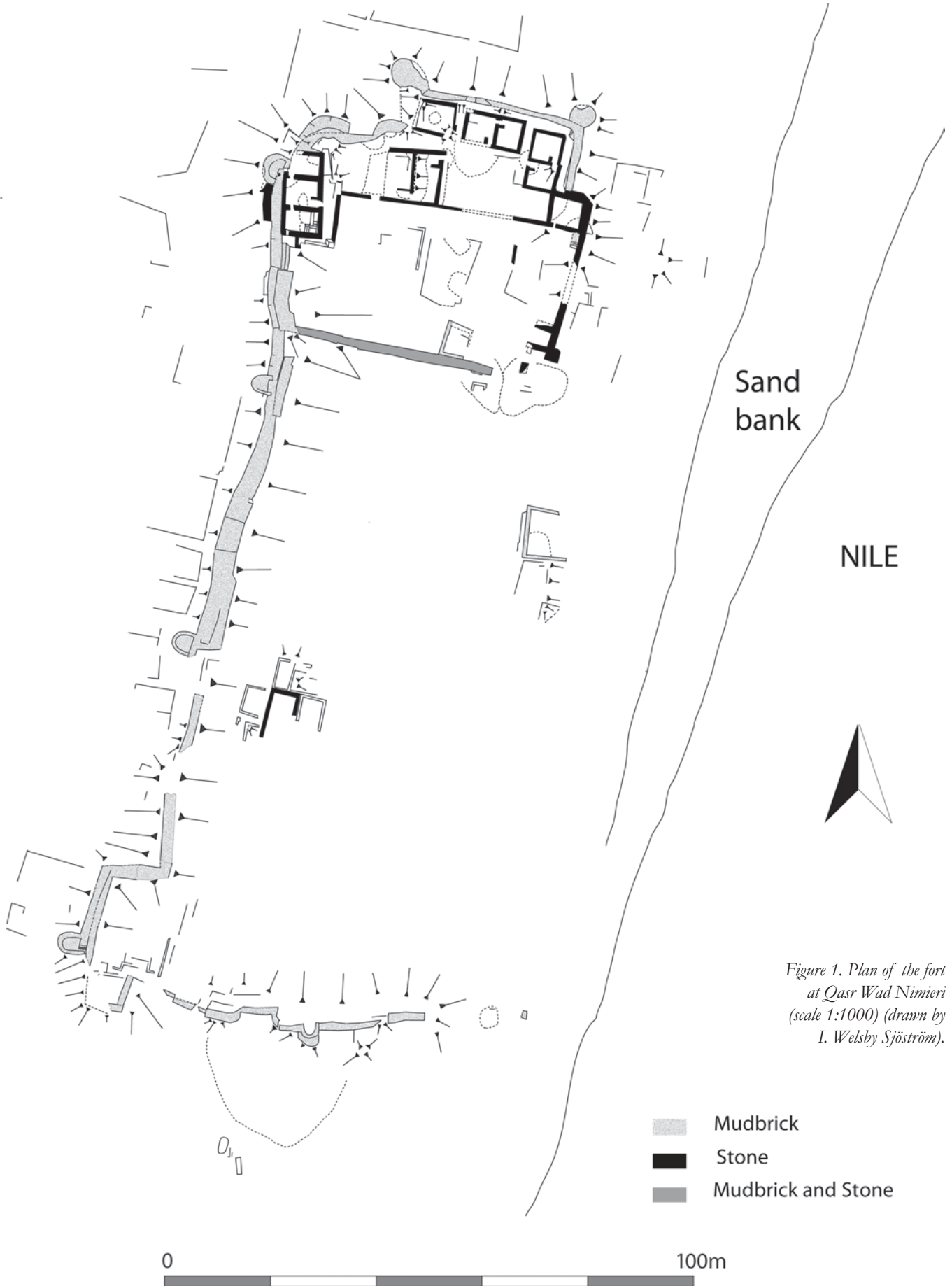


Figure 1. Plan of the fort at Qasr Wad Nimieri (scale 1:1000) (drawn by I. Welsby Sjöström).



Plate 2. General view over the settlement south of the fort.

North of the fort are foundations of structures which can be recognised when looking from the wall top of the fort. They extend east-west parallel to the northern wall of the fort and are cut by small gullies to the north.

To the west are the foundations of more structures extending north-south next to the western wall of the fort; in some cases fragments of stone can be seen.

The western section

South-west of the south-west angle of the fort are several stone buildings which are far better preserved. These consist of the remains of two or three large rectangular buildings, their long axes running east-west, immediately to the west of the fort (Plate 3). These structures are said to be the *khalwas*



Plate 3. The khalwas south-west of the fort.

that Hajj Sheriff and his sons established in that area as well as in the neighbouring lands. The *khalwas*, from which more than 2000 students graduated, were famous as far south as ed-Debba. They were supported and subsidised by the inhabitants of Labab Island. According to local tradition, the huge number of graves and *qubbas* is due to the many sheikhs who taught religious science here and created a cultural and scientific centre in the area. It was the terminus for most travellers, and even women had an opportunity to study there.

Beyond them on the higher ground was a huge cemetery which extends from north to south for about 2km. It is dotted with three white-washed, high-domed tombs and tens of mud and/or stone structures (Plate 4). There are two types of



Plate 4. A white-washed parabolic-domed qubba.

domed tombs, circular stepped and square stepped, situated beside roofless structures with *mihrab* niches and low-walled structures, as well as ordinary graves which are covered with pebbles at both ends and have earthen vessels at the southern end. Some also have palm branches (Plates 5 - 7).

Most of the pottery scatter is Islamic in date (Plate 8), with a few sherds of painted Christian type, but the latter are not nearly as numerous as on predominantly Christian sites like Old Dongola or even el-Khandaq, whose castle is probably contemporary with Qasr Wad Nimeiri (Crawford 1951, 32-33).

Dating

The fort

Naoam Shuqair (1967, 99) mentioned the small village of el-Khannag, 12 miles south of Dongola, as a centre of one of the Dongola kingdoms, famous before the Egyptian



Plate 5. Roofless structure with mihrab shrine.



Plate 6. Square-stepped qubba.



Plate 8. Islamic period incised pottery.

invasion, i.e. before 1821. He referred to the palace (fort) of Wad Namir, one of its ancient kings. Adams states that Nubian castle-building reached its fullest development in the region between the Third and the Fifth Cataracts, the heart of the old Dongola kingdom, at places like Khannag, el-Khandaq, Bakhit, el-Kab and el-Korro (Adams 1984, 518). Thus he dated the fort back to the feudal age of the Christian Kingdom of Makuria but elsewhere, based on the building materials employed, he writes

“This combination of baked brick and stone work is also found at the Shaygia castle of Kajebi, and it seems probable that here as there the baked bricks were taken from some other (Christian) building and re-used. The incorporation of houses in the wall is also a feature of the Shaygia and suggests that Qasr Wad Nemeiri in its present form belongs to the post Christian period. It is quite different both in plan and construction from the earlier forts with semi circular towers such as Bakhit and El Kab”.

(Adams 1984, 593).



Plate 7. Ordinary burials with their pebble covering, pots and palm fronds.

Sadik Effendi found a column drum of red sandstone 2 feet 3 inches in diameter lying on the ground, which could be Christian or even Meroitic (Crawford 1951, 33). Local people recall occupation of the fort until the Mahdiya, i.e. 1885-1898.

The cemetery

Shugair mentioned that here were the *qubbas* of the Dana-gla Sharifi, the Sherif family (Shugair 1967, 100). Ibrahim (1987, 29) mentioned Hajj Sheriff who was born in AH 580 (AD 1185) at Khannag and built a mosque there which still survives.

According to a local informant, the three white-washed domed *qubbas* are of the Sherifi family from Labab Island, the grandfathers of el-Mahdi. The eastern *qubba* is that of Hajj Sheriff and some of his sons. The western is of his son Hajj, and some of his sons, the northern one is of Satti Abdelgadir (Hajj Sheriff's son) and his sons, Satti and Mohammed wad Shamt. The two white-washed roofless burial places which are known as *haram* (sanctuary) and the cemetery next to it and the wadi are attributed to Satti Abidi (east of the northern white-washed *qubba*). The second (west of the other two white-washed *qubbas*) is of Mohamed Hajj Sheriff, the grandfather of Imam el-Mahdi. If the Mahdi was born in the third decade of the 19th century, then this *qubba* can be dated to the second half of the 18th century.

The stepped *qubbas* were interpreted by some local people as watch towers, while others call one of them the Kafrin *qubba* (the *qubba* of the non-believer). The Myshairfa people, however, think that they were the burial places of Sheikh Idris wad el-Arbab's ancestors or that they were used for storing grain (*sbuna*) or arms by the Mamluks who fled south from Egypt after the Cairo Citadel massacre. The Mamluks ruled between the Shaigiia country and Wadi Halfa for about nine years (Robinson 1922, 94). A party fled to el-Haimar and lived with the Ababdeh. Some of the Mamluks died there and their tombs were recognized by travellers 130 years ago (i.e. in the late 19th century) (Robinson 1922, 90). Since as yet we do not have any clue to the form of these monuments

we cannot decide whether they were burial places or *shunas*.

Some local informants consider the square-stepped *qubbas* reminiscent of Fatimid lamps, since the Hajj Sheriff tradition preserves a memory of their flight from the Fatimids. As far as the shape and forms of the lamps, whether of glass or pottery, they are not like these structures.

Conclusion

The very large site at Qasr Wad Nimieri is in need of more detailed study, this survey being the first step.² Test pits and sondages are a necessity, while further investigation of documents and oral tradition might help to explain some of the features observed. The Mamluks' presence in the area is a historical fact, but whether during their nine-year rule they succeeded in building some structures is doubtful, since they were continually retreating from town to town upstream to Shendi, and sometimes out into the desert.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the people of el-Khandaq for their continuing support of our group. Special thanks go to Babkair's family, to his wife Afaf and children for the comfortable accommodation and excellent hospitality. Many thanks also to M. Nour (the *Mudir*) for making preparations prior to our arrival and to David Hooker for surveying the fort together with Isabella Welsby Sjöström.

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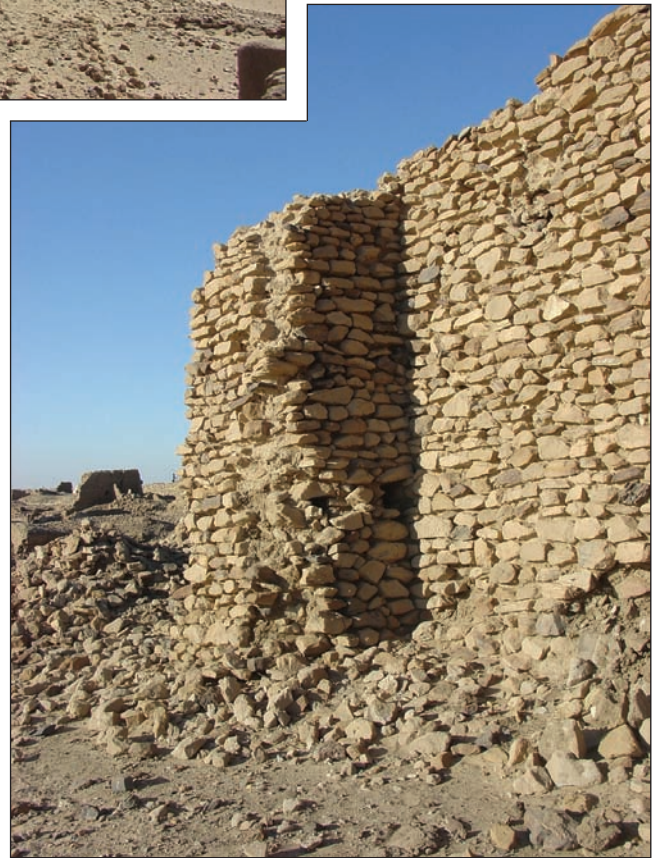
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² The survey was undertaken as a part of the third season of the project: *The Archaeological and Cultural Survey of the Northern Dongola Reach, Western bank, from el-Khandaq to Hannek*.



Colour plate XXXIV. Qasr Wad Nimieri. The northern part of the fort with buildings and courtyard.

Colour plate XXXV. Qasr Wad Nimieri. Detail of the southern end of the east wall. The 'buttress' is on the north side of the possible gateway.



Colour plate XXXVI. Qasr Wad Nimieri. General view of the fort from the north.

