

# SUDAN & NUBIA

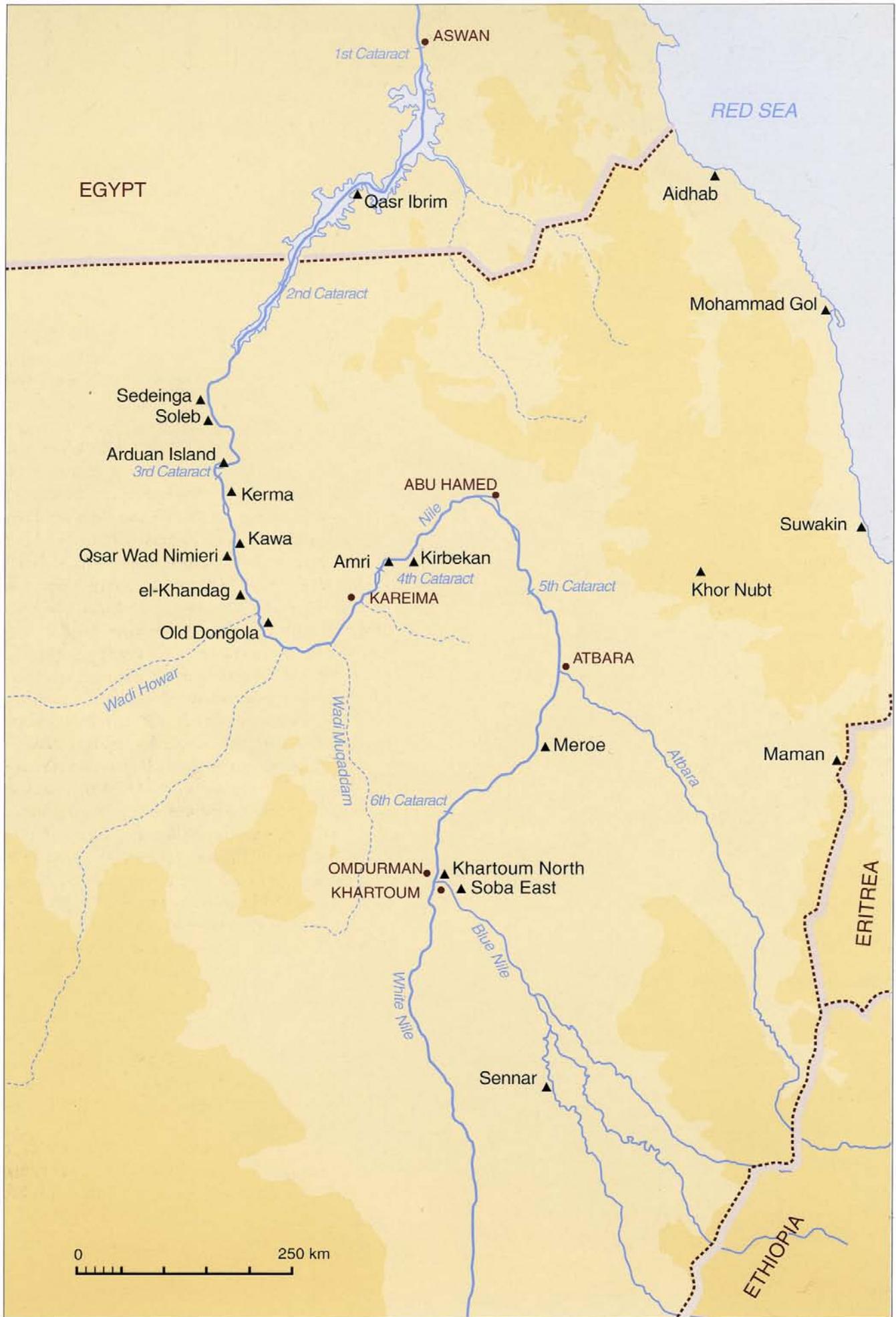
The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



*Bulletin No. 4*

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*Front Cover:* Meroe. Pyramid BEG N 18 (type XII) before restoration work on the chapel. In the background pyramid BEG N 9 (type VII). Photo taken by F. W. Hinkel in 1980 from the top of BEG N 19 (slide 5467).

## Introduction

*Vivian Davies*

During the last winter the Society resumed its flagship project at Kawa, among other things uncovering more of the early Kushite town, including an extraordinary mud-brick building once decorated with wall-paintings showing royal and divine figures and containing the remains of large ceramic figures of the gods Bes and Beset (see Welsby below). We also responded to the international appeal for help from the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums to document sites threatened by the planned Merowe Dam, carrying out a survey on the left bank of the Nile and on the islands between Amri and Kirkeban above the Fourth Cataract which identified well over a hundred sites of different types and periods (Welsby). Qasr Ibrim, for many years under excavation by the Egypt Exploration Society and still yielding information of first-rate importance (Rose), embodies an acute reminder of the destructive consequences of dams and of the loss to knowledge that such schemes entail.

The need for rescue-work in response to various threats (environmental as well as man-made) is a thread running through much of this issue, which also includes reports on the study and conservation of the monuments at Meroe (Hinkel), excavation necessitated by road-building at Soba East (Abdel Rahman Ali Mohamed), archaeological survey in the little-known Fifth Cataract region (Yousef El-Amin and Edwards), and continuing investigation of the Mahas region at the Third Cataract (Edwards and Ali Osman), the latter an interdisciplinary project which now valuably incorporates ecological, ethnographic and linguistic components (Muhammad Jalal Hashim and Bell). We are also very pleased to include two papers on aspects of Islamic archaeology in the Sudan (Intisar Soghayroun el-Zein and Salah Omer Elsadig), hitherto a chronically neglected subject but clearly one with great potential for further research.

It is an enormous pleasure to report that Professor William Y. Adams, one of the great names of modern Sudanese archaeology, has accepted our invitation to become Honorary President of SARS, in succession to the late Sir Laurence Kirwan. Professor Adams takes office in time to preside over our tenth anniversary in 2001, a year in which SARS celebrates a decade of progressive achievement and looks forward to the formidable but exciting challenges that lie ahead.



# The Archaeology of the Early Islamic Period in the Republic of Sudan

*Intisar Soghayroun el-Zein*

## Introduction

The Republic of the Sudan, the largest country in Africa, is highly differentiated both geographically and culturally. Geographically the country occupies at least three different ecological zones: the Sahara to the north, the savannah in the middle and the equatorial forests to the south, with the Nile crossing it from south to north, its tributaries stretching from Ethiopia in the east to Chad.

Culturally, the country possesses a considerable diversity of ethnic and cultural components. There are Arab and Arabized peoples, especially the Nubians, in the north and central Sudan, Beja tribes in the east, Nuba and Fur to the west and Nilotic tribes to the south. The country before Christianity and Islam had a variety of individual expressions of religious beliefs.

Much of the country has, from the early days of Islam, been opened to slow Arab penetration. It has accepted Islam and changes that have taken place in Dar-al-Islam from both the north (Egypt) and east (Arabian Peninsula). This will be considered in three phases:

Phase 1 from 640 - c. 1300 CE

Phase 2 from 1300 - 1500 CE

Phase 3 from 1500 - 1800 CE

## Phase 1: CE 640 - 1300

This phase witnessed the most significant event, which was the conquest of Egypt in CE 640/AH 20 by Arabic speaking Muslims, camel herders from Arabia. At that time Nubia, the Middle Nile Valley, was ruled by the powerful Christian kingdoms of Makurra with its capital at Old Dongola and 'Alwa with its capital at Soba, near the junction of the Blue and White Niles. Arab armies tried twice to conquer Makurra and in the second attempt they reached as far south as Old Dongola. The campaign ended with a peace treaty in CE 651/AH 31, the first of its type in Dar-al-Islam, known as the *Baqt*. It was in essence a commercial treaty which gave Nubia peace for six hundred years. As a result of this treaty, and the Arab conquest of Egypt, the nomadic tribes of Arabia began to migrate into the region as they did throughout North Africa. A group of the Rabi'a tribe established itself in the Nile Valley in the Aswan region, but the main occupation was in the Eastern Desert where they intermarried with the Beja (Paul 1954, 71) and thus a process of Islamisation was started.

Trade with the savannah continued to flourish in this

period as it had done for 2000 years. Slaves, gold, ivory, ebony and leopard skins were among the commodities that moved northward, while manufactured goods like pottery, glass and spices moved southward (Adams 1988, 32). This trade was carried on freely between the Nubian kingdoms and the Muslims. From the account of Ibn Selim and other writers (Maqrizi 1906, 323), it is clear that the trade was in the hands of Muslims who after the 9<sup>th</sup> century were allowed to travel and settle freely in Lower Nubia. The trade continued, flourishing during the Fatimid and Ayyubid dynasties in Egypt, but started to decline during the Mamluk time CE 1250-1517.

'Aidhab and other Red Sea ports continued in use and there was more Muslim penetration. On al-Rih island, where Badi' is located, the increase of Muslim islanders was mainly due to the increase of trading by Muslim merchants from the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Kawatoko 1993, 188). The Rabi'a-Beja coalition prospered to such a degree that they came to dominate the frontier region of the Wadi al-'Alaqui gold and emerald mining area and the pilgrims route via 'Aidhab (Paul 1954, 72).

West of the Nile, after CE 1000, Arab nomads spread throughout the sahel and savannah as camel and cattle herders. Similar groups, who had opened the camel caravan route across the Sahara including Darb-al-Arba'in (Forty Days' Road), gradually coalesced to form states in Darfur in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Tunjur sultanate was founded in this period with palaces and mosques (Musa 1986, 220-22).

## *The process of Islamisation*

1. The *Baqt* treaty opened the way for Arab migration into Makurra and the acceptance of Islam from the north and east and it was continued between the First and the Second Cataracts, i.e. Lower Nubia, by Muslims merchants during the rule of Kanz-ad-Dawla (a title given by the Fatimids to the ruler of Aswan and his successors).

2. The earliest reference to mosques at Old Dongola is CE 651. Ibn Selim al Aswani in his mission to the king of Makurra in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century said that he had performed the Barium prayers in the mosque at the capital with sixty Muslims.

3. Documents from Qasr Ibrim indicate that there had been settlement of Arabs in Lower Nubia since the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Adams 1984, 464). Many documents in Arabic have been found there dating from the Fatimid period.

4. Tombstones from Nubia and the Eastern Desert and ports provide evidence for the gradual spread of Muslims, e.g. tombstones in northern Nubia, from Taifa, Kalabsha, Qertassi and Derr ranging in date between CE 822 and 1027, and from Badi' and Khor Nubt (Plate 1) between CE 877 and 1045 (Kawatoko 1993, 190-192).

5. Further south in 'Alwa there were also Muslim traders. There was a lodging house, a *ribat* as mentioned by Ibn Selim (Magrizi 1906, 311-12) at Soba, where a number of Muslim merchants lodged.



Plate 1. Tombstone from Khor Nubt.

6. Reference to the earliest mosques at 'Ain Farah, Uri in western Sudan, which are dated to the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Musa 1986, 220).

7. Imported Islamic objects especially pottery were among the traded commodities which have been recovered from many sites, e.g. Kulubnarti, Qasr Ibrim, Old Dongola, Soba, Sennar, Badi' and 'Aidhab.

### Phase 2: CE 1300-1500

The documentary evidence from this period is wholly Islamic. There were two major developments in this 200 years: the kingdom of Makurra disappeared and 'Ulama (scholars) arrived from Arabia and established *kebalwas* and mosques e.g. Ghullam Allah Ibn 'Aid, whose father came from Yemen and found the Muslims of Dongola in extreme perplexity and confusion (Dayf Allah 1992, 10).

By 1317, the Muslim members of the ruling class had become kings of Makurra. This was the result of a long period of intervention by the Mamluk rulers of Egypt in the internal affairs of this kingdom. By 1365/6 Dongola was in ruins and had been abandoned perhaps temporarily by most of its inhabitants (Trimingham 1983, 70).

With the removal of the political barrier Arab migration into the Nile Valley and the Eastern Desert increased and penetrated southward to the Butana (between the Blue Nile and River 'Atbara), the Suakin hinterland and the Gezira (between the Blue and White Niles). The destruction of the kingdom of 'Alwa came in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century when Arab tribes of the 'Abdallab confederation overran the Gezira and dominated its population. In CE 1476, Arabic-speaking people developed the town of Arbaji, 150km south-east of Khartoum, which became a commercial centre during the Funj period.

'Aidhab which prospered on the trade and pilgrims route

began to decline after Salah ad-Din of the Ayyubid dynasty defeated the Latin Christian kingdom of Jerusalem and the pilgrims moved back to the overland route through Sinai. Its end came as a result of a punitive expedition sent by the Mamluk Sultan Bars Bey in 1426. From this time onwards began the rise of the port of Suakin.

### *The process of Islamisation*

1. This period witnessed the coming of individual learned holy men whose main concern was not conquest or trade but teaching the people the right practices of Islam.

2. In most of the northern and eastern regions the Nubian and Beja people became bilingual. The Fur in the west passed through a similar process. Arabic spread from the Red Sea to Chad in the west and from Aswan southwards to latitude 10 N (Hassan 1973, 134).

3. The incoming Arabs in the Nile Valley and the savannah were absorbed in varying degrees by the people of the land. Their descendants speak Nubian or Nuba as well as Arabic. Though indigenous people offered little resistance to this process, they remodelled it considerably and preserved not only the Sudanese racial elements but their own identity to be seen in customs, language, music and material culture of the Nubians, the Beja and the others. Many of the sites of the northern Sudan show a gradual process of Islamisation, e.g. Kulubnarti, Meinarti and Old Dongola.

### Phase 3: CE 1500-1800

This phase is characterised by four major events:

1. After the collapse of Makurra and the flow of the Arabs into the country, the kingdom of 'Alwa had been left isolated from the Christian north and was overrun by Beja/Arab nomads. Its end was inevitable for it was in no position to offer effective resistance to the marauding nomads (Hassan 1980, 122). The actual downfall of 'Alwa in CE 1504 is generally supposed to have been caused by the alliance of the Qawasma Arabs with the Funj who suddenly appeared east of the White Nile from the south-west. Thus Christianity completely disappeared and Abyssinia (Ethiopia) was left as the sole Christian kingdom in Africa (Trimingham 1983, 75).

2. The rise of the first powerful Islamic state in the Middle Nile. This was the Funj or the Black Sultanate, which marked the supremacy of Islam in the present Republic of the Sudan. During this period there developed the *kebalwas* and mosques of the early indigenous Muslims and the Sufi orders. In the Sudan the religious life became bound up with holy men and to think of Allah without his intermediaries was impossible. This aspect proves the impact of local beliefs and customs upon orthodox or Sunni Islam in a direct way. Sufism and Islam are synonyms for the Sudanese as a term and as a historical process in the wider cultural and religious history of the country (el-Zein 1987, 10).

3. The third major event was the defeat of the Mamluks



Plate 2. The town at el-Khandag.

of Egypt in CE 1517 by Selim I, the Ottoman Turkish Sultan, and from then until the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was administered as a province of that empire. The Ottoman defeats in Abyssinia in the 1550-70s led to them transferring their interest to the Nile Valley where they attacked the Funj Sultanate. In the Dongola Reach, near the Third Cataract, they met with resistance from the army of the Funj in 1584 and in 1585 the frontier between the two sultanates was fixed at Hannek where it was to remain until 1820. To defend the new frontier, they constructed the fortress of Sai to garrison the area as at Qasr Ibrim. Those alien, Arabic and Turkish speaking garrisons, were regularly reinforced and in time became landowners, and Nubian speaking.

4. The fourth development was that in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century Darfur witnessed the rise of an Islamic state and its Keira dynasty. Trade flourished at this time via Darb-al-Arba'in with Egypt and across the savannah of central Sudan to west Africa, following the pilgrim route (Insoll 1996, 456).

With the establishment of these regimes the stage of proselytization came to its end and a new era of reform and of teaching of the Quran began in the south and west; in the north the religious administration of the Sunni Ottoman Caliphate was in place. The Funj and the Fur invited 'Ulama from abroad as well as those living locally in the case of the Fur. The Sudanese now began to travel abroad for religious studies especially at al-Azhar in Cairo.

South of latitude 10 N, there were no Christian or Islamic missionaries before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Muslim traders entered south of the Sudd, and some of them settled there but with no intentions of propagating Islam. Archaeological works so far conducted have revealed the

existence of stone age and late iron age cultures.

### Concluding Comments

1. The territory of the Republic of the Sudan as we know it was never part of an Islamic caliphate, except for the Sanjak of Ibrim and the port of Suakin, which were parts of the Ottoman empire. Thus the architectural and other features we have come to associate with Islamic countries are not to be found in the Sudan, which lacks the magnificent architectural manifestations as well as fine objects which attract the attention of Islamic archaeologists and museum personnel.

2. The first rulers of the Funj sultanate were pre-occupied with legitimising their rule over Muslim Arabs by encouraging Muslim reformers from abroad and claiming Arab pedigrees rather than with building magnificent edifices to the new religion. Actually they had never been exposed to such architecture.

3. The extensive use of mud as the main building material and the abandonment or rebuilding of most earlier structures has led to few being available for study today. The greatly increased documentary evidence, however, allows the main developments to be understood.

4. The nature of Sufi Islam necessitates simplicity in every thing including architecture.

5. Evidence from the Red Sea coast and the Eastern Desert includes the remains of buildings, cisterns, cemeteries, mosques, tombstones and ceramic scatters.

6. Evidence from the Nile Valley includes town sites (Plate 2), mosques (Colour Plate, back cover), *gubbas* (Plate 3), *khalwas*, and artefactual remains such as pottery, glass and

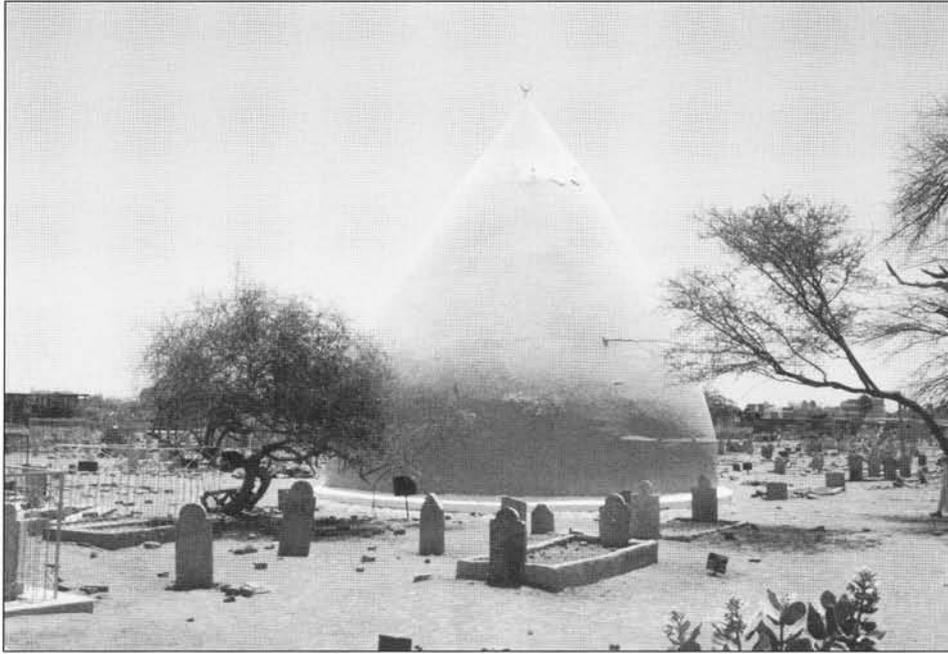


Plate 3. The gubba of Sheikh Hamad at Khartoum North.

documents.

7. West of the Nile, no sites so far have been recognised in Kordofan. As for Darfur, evidence includes palaces and mosques.

8. The objects that are only likely to be found in the excavation of settlements and abandoned sites of *khalwas* are the following:

- a) Objects connected with administration like the *kakar* (Plate 4), sceptres, seals and documents.
- b) Objects connected with military activities like firearms, swords, spears, kettledrums, saddles, shields, chainmail, and helmets.
- c) Objects connected with the household like furniture, doors, locks, keys, beds, mats, spinning and weaving equip-



Plate 4. A kakar, a throne seat of the Funj kings.

ment, perfume containers and leather skirts (*rabat*).

d) Objects connected with religious rituals like prayer mats, rosaries, ablution pitchers, *bijab*, and *loab* (wooden slate).

e) Objects connected with agriculture and animal husbandry like saqiya, adzes, sickles, ropes, baskets, tethering pegs and harnesses.

f) Personal belongings like clothing, jewellery (glass and metal), shoes, smoking pipes, daggers and sheaths.

g) Food debris which includes plant and animal remains.

h) Knee hobbles, herdsmen pipes, bullets, water skin, daggers and sheaths from nomad campsites.

### The present state of Islamic research in the Sudan

1. Very few attempts have been made at an archaeological reconnaissance of Islamic material culture. In the archaeological surveys of Nubia 1911-66, Islamic remains were unfortunately excluded. Only Monneret de Villard while looking for Christian remains (1935) included some mosques and tombs in Lower Nubia within his study.

2. General research papers on Islamic evidence have been presented by Plumley (1972), Osman (1982) and Adams (1987).

3. Direct archaeological surveys have been carried out by Yunis (at Ain Farah 1978), El-Hussein (at Abu Haraz 1978), Mohammed (at Arbaji 1979), Sanjak (at Qerri 1979), and El-Zein (at Sennar 1982, and of *gubbas* in central Sudan 1987).

4. Partial surveys are included in Musa 1986 (of Darfur) and by Alexander and Schlee (forthcoming) at Sai.

5. The only semi-complete work is the study of Suakin by Greenlaw published in 1964.



It is obvious that the state of research is in its very beginnings. The international view of Islamic archaeology as a provider of fine objects to museums and as a concentration of magnificent buildings of the Islamic caliphate continues to have a disastrous effect on the development of this science. Thus no attempts have been made towards the understanding of the social context of any site or the ordinary life of the people and no consideration is given to the Islamic countries of Sub-Saharan Africa which were never ruled by the Islamic caliphate. Towards this better understanding we have the pioneer work of T. Insoll in Mali and his general study of the archaeology of Islam (Insoll 1996; 1999).

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