

# Alwan art. Towards an insight into the aesthetics of the Kingdom of Alwa through the painted pottery decoration

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## Introduction

The Kingdom of Alwa was described by Arab travellers as richer and more powerful than Makuria<sup>1</sup> (Vantini 1975, 72, 162-63, 274-5, 613-4; Shinnie 1978, 256). This may reflect the greater agricultural potential of its territory in the Sahel and was perhaps also due to the important role it played in trade contacts between Egypt, the Red Sea ports, southern Sudan and the Ethiopian highlands. Arab writers recorded also that gold mines under Alwan control were plentiful (Vantini 1975, 167; Welsby 2002, 211, 213-215). Unfortunately the poorly preserved archaeological remains and the paucity of research allows us to say little about its material culture in a wider context.

Owing to the generally extremely poor state of preservation, very few sites that can be dated to the period of the Kingdom of Alwa have been investigated so far. Aspects of its art can be discussed on the basis of the remains of a handful of sites, mainly Soba, the capital of the kingdom (Shinnie 1955; Welsby 1998; Welsby and Daniels 1991). A number of cemeteries discovered along the Blue Nile, where grave goods were mainly composed of pottery, can be dated to the early medieval period, the transitional period between Kushite culture and Christianity (Welsby 2014, 185-186). Records of settlement sites are infrequent and the architectural remains are limited to the few examples of churches uncovered at Soba, Saqadi and Musawwarat es-Sufra. Even fewer examples survive when it comes to architectural sculpture and wall paintings.

Therefore the present text, which is an attempt to define some general features of Alwan art, is based almost exclusively on the analysis of pottery from Soba, which can be dated from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>2</sup> The aforementioned monuments, like churches, will be discussed briefly in the context of the periods distinguished below and based on cultural and political changes in the Nubian states and amongst their neighbours. Pottery was the most common category of artifact found at Soba; the issues of methods of manufacture, fabrics, forms, wares, decoration and finds distribution on the site were first classified by P. L. Shinnie (1955, 28-50) and then extensively published in two monographs (Welsby 1998; Welsby and Daniels 1991). Further analysis, mainly of the

aesthetic aspects of the vessels' decorations, as well as their connections to other artifacts from neighbouring kingdoms (Makuria and Aksum), are considered here in the hope that they can provide new data for Alwan studies.

The bulk of the painted pottery was discovered at Soba during the second campaign of the British Institute in Eastern Africa (1989-1992), with a few exclusively decorated sherds coming from the earlier seasons which had focused on churches and a palatial structure (Welsby and Daniels 1991, 227). Painted motifs were discussed in volume 2 of the report on the BIEA's work published in 1998, where the terms 'Soba Ware' and 'Red Slipped Vessels with Black and White Decoration' for the specific pottery under discussion here were used. The chronology spans from the 5<sup>th</sup> century to the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. Motifs were divided into categories and separate types (Welsby 1998, 119, 170-172), as in the important monograph on Lower Nubian pottery by W. Y. Adams (1986). The absence of parallels amongst the material from northern Nubia led to the conclusion that: "[Soba Ware] has very little in common with the fine wares of the Meroitic period and presumably did not evolve from those types. It is, therefore, a new pottery tradition but where did the inspiration come from?" (Welsby 1991, 11). Occasionally, some elements resembled designs known from the Nobadian wares (former X-Group, Transitional and Early Christian Periods); however, the vessels imported from the north were almost totally absent in the archaeological contexts where Soba Ware predominated. In the course of the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD, the local painted pottery was replaced by imports from northern workshops based in Makuria, which became dominant amongst the fine ware (Welsby 2002, 234-236). It is noteworthy that, together with 'Classic' and 'Late' Christian vessels from Makuria, also glazed wares and glass objects from Egypt appeared in Soba, while the 'Terminal' wares are absent (Welsby 1991, 15-16; 2002).

## Early Period – Meroitic Inheritance

In the early period of the formation of the new states (5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) the dominant (although not very numerous) fine pottery at Soba was the so-called Red Ware ('Red Slipped Vessels with Black and White Decoration' according to Welsby's nomenclature). It is represented mainly by wheel-made, small, hemispherical bowls, with red or orange slip and smoothed or burnished surfaces. Painted decoration was limited to bands or separated decorative elements, with black outlines and white filling, e.g. rectangular and squared boxes with inner cross-hatchings, crosses or stylized floral motifs (Welsby 1998, figs 74-77), also called 'black and white style'. (Figure 1 a-e). Similar vessels were found at Gabati but also in the north at Firka and Old Dongola and have been dated broadly to the 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD (Welsby 2002, 234). The Early Dongola Red Ware with 'metope' designs (mid-2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD) reflects the same idea of decoration: black outlines, white/yellow infilling of rectangular or square boxes with cross or ankh-like motifs or crosses with yellow

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the travellers accounts see Shinnie 1955, 12, 82.

<sup>2</sup> The authors would like to thank Derek Welsby for the invitation to study this material and giving us the opportunity of working on the Soba pottery in the British Museum collection.

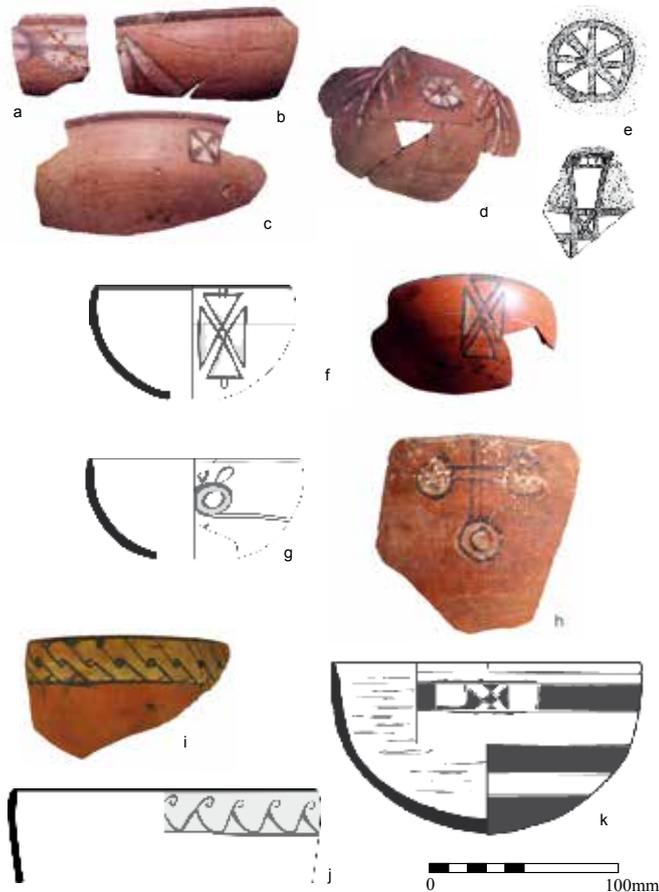


Figure 1. Soba Red Ware a-d: (courtesy of D. Welsby SARS Soba Archive) and decoration motifs e (Welsby 1998, figs 75: 729, 74: 717), Early Red Ware from Old Dongola f, g and h: (courtesy of W. Godlewski and K. Danys PCMA UW Archive), Nobadian Red Ware from Qasr el-Wizz i and j: (courtesy of B. Williams, OINE Archive and K. Danys), Fine Painted Ware from Walkarida k: (Benoist et al. 2016, fig. 5: 10).

filling in the arms ending in serifs with round-shaped ornaments (Figure 1f-h). The Lower Nubian specimens, e.g. from Qasr el-Wizz, boast the use of the same colour palette, but the decoration is in the form of a continuous band on the upper part of cylindrical cups (Figure 1i and j).

As noticed by Derek Welsby, the relative rarity of Red Ware vessels at Soba suggests that they were imports; however, the similarity of the Red Ware and Soba Ware forms and fabrics may indicate the local origins of this pottery. The aforementioned examples seem to use the same style of decoration, but with regional variations: Nobadian, Makurian and Alwan. In general, these vessels represent a continuation of typical Meroitic features, such as a wheel-made technique, relatively thin walls, and a composition of decorative elements appearing on the vessel in the form of bands and individual motifs, usually with a single one repeating regularly on the body (Adams 1964, 142). It is worth noting that stand-alone motifs, painted in black with white/yellow filling appeared on the Meroitic handmade ware of the D.I pottery group (Adams 1986, figs 112.26-

1; 247.31) and they resemble those designs on Soba's Red Ware. The quality of these vessels with 'metopes' indicate the existence of highly qualified workshops, possibly continuing to function despite the collapse of the Meroitic empire. A similar phenomenon could be observed in the case of the masonry workshops in Faras. Both the quality of the architectural stone decoration dated to the 7<sup>th</sup> century as well as the forms and repertoire of decorative elements prove the persistence of the continuous tradition of producing such elements after the disintegration of the Kushite state organisation (Godlewski 1992, 286-87, Zielińska 2016, 35, Zielińska forth.). A different situation occurred at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, at the end of the Kingdom of Makuria and beginning of so-called Funj period. At that period the decay of state-supported production brought a significant change – the end of the wheel-made tradition and the flourishing of handmade wares. Usage of the potter's wheel only survived in the manufacture of *qanmadis* (*saqia* pots), which were still thrown (Adams 1986, 23).

It is worth noting that very similar hemispherical bowls with painted decoration like those of the Red Ware from Soba were recently found at Walkarida in northern Ethiopia (Benoist et al. 2016, fig. 5: 9, 10), dated to the middle-late Aksumite period (AD 350/400-800) (Figure 1k). It should be noted that this type of Red Ware with 'black and white/yellow' motifs standing alone does not appear north of the Third Cataract (apart from the Nobadian variant mentioned above); it seems to be a common feature of the southern region of the former Kushite state, apparently significantly linked with Aksumite Ethiopia.

Another trend, apart from the aforementioned Red Ware tradition, is a new kind of aesthetic that appeared in the Late Meroitic and 'Post-Meroitic' periods and seems to have continued into Early Christian times. It reveals a different concept as well as a different technique of decoration. Its characteristic feature is the use of various geometric ornaments that mostly cover the whole body of a vessel, applied in a thick, impasto-like way on the red, orange or purple slipped and burnished surfaces. Such kinds of design can be observed on one type of hand-made objects that are interpreted as pot-stands, chalices and/or incense burners (?). These were found in the graves of the 'Post-Meroitic' period, for example at Meroe (Garstang et al. 1911, pl. XLII, no. 3) and Gabati (Smith 1998, fig. 6.28: T6/92c) (Figure 2a-c). This kind of artistic style seems to have continued and became dominant in a later period on the most characteristic type of Alwan pottery (see below). Moreover, the impasto technique is also quite characteristic for handmade jars with a narrow neck, derived from 'Post-Meroitic' shapes occurring in Dongolese pottery of the mid of 6<sup>th</sup>-early 7<sup>th</sup> century AD (Figure 2d and e) (Danys 2016, fig. 7).

The link between techniques used in decoration of the Meroitic and 'Post-Meroitic' vessels can be also seen in the aforementioned impasto-method of applying white dots on the black patterns. Such small dots on black stripes appeared



Figure 2. Examples of pot-stands, chalices or/and incense burners (a-c) from Meroitic and 'Post-Meroitic' graves at Meroe a-c: courtesy of D. Welsby (SARS Soba Archive), handmade bottle from Old Dongola d: courtesy of W. Godlewski (PCMA UW Archive), e: (Danys 2016, fig. 7) and Soba Ware bowls decorated with an impasto technique f: courtesy of D. Welsby (SARS Soba Archive), g: (microphotograph D. Zielińska).

on handmade wares of Meroitic Group D.I (Adams 1986, fig. 112: 6.1), and then was incorporated into 'Post-Meroitic' stylistic Group N.IIA, where white dots appeared on large black spots (Adams 1986, fig. 144: 8.4), resembling some of the examples of Soba Ware.

Analysing early pottery from Soba in a wider context, it can be noticed that it reflects a process that appeared in the whole territory of the former Kingdom of Kush. After the fall of the state, the disappearance of centralised (state organised?) workshops resulted in a differentiation and the beginning of more regionalised pottery production, influenced by different factors (Danys in prep.). The most northerly state, Nobadia, was strongly influenced by neighbouring Egypt, something that was evident already in the late Meroitic period from the numbers of imports and their local imitations, well seen in the inventories of the Ballana and Qustul cemeteries (Williams 1991, 62ff.). Both Makuria and Alwa remained attached to the Meroitic traditions for a longer period. While Makuria came more under Byzantine influence, because of its conversion to Christianity from there, and part of the pottery production imitated Late Ro-

man vessel shapes, the Kingdom of Alwa retained its own style and forms with possible links to Aksum.

### Soba Ware 'Period'

Between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, the fine-ware ceramics from Soba were dominated by the local products known as Soba Ware. Eight subdivisions, among them styles A, B and E (Welsby 1998, 170), will be reconsidered as expressions of aesthetic and cultural interactions. Among this material, one main tendency was towards a rich, very distinctive painted decoration. This aspect of the unique Alwan style is characterised by the dense decorative motifs, painted in white, black and red, applied usually on a black background. The noticeable technique of thick impasto application, using up to three thick layers of paint, is reminiscent of the painted decoration discussed above (Figure 2f and g).

The most common vessels ornamented in such a way were bowls of different shapes (Welsby 1998, figs 47, 53.1-54.25), as well as chalices (Welsby 1998, fig. 53) (Figure 3a-g, i and j). On the other hand, another style of complex compositions, painted in red and black, appeared on a creamy background (Welsby 1998, 170, fig. 104).



Figure 3. Examples of Soba Ware, mainly with geometrical forms filled with cross-hatchings or plait-like designs on bowls a, c, e-g and i and chalices b, d and j: (courtesy of D. Welsby SARS Soba Archive), the illumination of Ethiopian codex h: (Appleyard 1993, fig. 1) and the Ethiopian wall-painting of Maria orans k: (Appleyard 1993, fig. 2).



In the first of the aforementioned groups, the extremely rich repertoire of ornaments contains geometrical forms such as circles, squares, rectangles and rhombs filled with cross-hatchings (Welsby 1998, figs 79, 1026, 1030-1031, 1036-1037; 80, 1039-1040). Another popular pattern is a plaiting-like motif or ornament, composed of dense thin lines in different sets (Welsby 1998, figs 86, 1150, 87, 88: 1166-1167), which, together with other designs, creates complex compositions covering large parts of the vessels (in many cases on both, inner and outer surface of the vessel) (Figure 3b, d and j). Similar designs do not occur in the contemporary Makurian pottery or wall painting. In Makuria, especially in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, both pottery and wall painting is characterised by simplified, unified forms and infrequent ornamental decoration (Zielińska *forth.*, Danys in prep.; Martens-Czarnecka 1982, 15ff.). Only the single ornamental motifs can find parallels in the art of Makuria, such as the four-dot rosettes or ornamental bands (Martens-Czarnecka 1982, Ib:1-3, IIa) or rhomboidal net (see below in the next section, Figure 8e). For the checkerboard pattern or the unusual motif of tapering boxes of cross hatching, the closest parallels can be found on Ethiopian wall-paintings and manuscript illuminations, but these are of a much later period (Figure 3h and k) (Appleyard 1993, cat. 1 and 2 fig. 1,2). Apart from geometric decoration, both animal protomes and human faces appear as decoration, and can be considered one of the most distinctive features of Soba Ware.

Bosses in the shape of animal heads were usually applied as applique elements, quite often combined with painted details of the creature and continuous bands, filled with different designs (Figure 4a-d). The decoration appears only on the upper part of the vessel, while the lower remains undecorated. Alwan bowls with animal-like bosses are found also outside of the kingdom; two examples are known from Old Dongola (Pluskota 1991, fig. 69; Danys *forth.* A), both of the Soba Ware G group, represented by black, reduced products, devoid of painted decoration and one from Qasr el-Wizz belonging to the group with a creamy background (Danys *forth.* B). The animal protomes can be found earlier in Meroitic art as a popular motif, of various scales and in a range of contexts. They were used in stone relief decoration and on jewellery with representations of gods (Figure 4e and g). In pottery such frontal representations can also be found, although only as two-dimensional painted elements, which is paralleled also in the Soba Ware collection (Figure 4e and f). The features of the bosses suggest that various species could be represented but it is impossible to define the exact kind of animal (possible identifications are lions, cows, hyenas or giraffes).

Painted human faces, although not very common, seem to be the most striking element of Soba Ware decoration. They usually appear as a row of haloed heads around the body of the vessel (Figure 5d). They are of a round or elongated shape with round big eyes strongly angled to one side, usually very simplified or even geometric in form (Figure 5a-c). Both composition and stylistic elements, especially the sideways



Figure 4. Examples of Soba Ware with bosses of animal protomes, a, b, c, d and f: (courtesy of D. Welsby SARS Soba Archive), examples of Meroitic depictions of animals on painted jar from Faras e: (Griffith 1924, pl. XLV: 12) and in stone sculpture from the Apedemak Temple at Musanwarat es-Sufra g: (Wenig 1978, 92, fig. 65).

looking eyes, do not resemble contemporary art in Makuria (cf. Martens-Czarnecka 1972). Unfortunately, the fragmentary state of the representations does not allow deeper iconographic identification, although such representations can be interpreted as heads of virtues or angels.

Very similar in concept is a representation of virtues on the arch of a niche in Room 6 in the Monastery of Apa Apollo in Bawit (Maspero 1931, 145-6, pl. XXII-III) (Figure 5f) and a similar one in a niche in cell 1725 of the Monastery of Apa Jeremias in Saqqara (Figures 5g and 6b) (Quibell 1912, 134, pl. XXII-III). A closer examination of stylistic features leads to stylistic considerations. Painted human representations appear on Meroitic pottery, although the number of such pieces is extremely small (Figure 5e). The style of some of those representations might be inspired by the Hellenistic world that reached Nubia through Ptolemaic Egypt as in the case of new vessel forms and painted vine branches (Nowotnick 2016, 405, figs 1-5). Human representations (although very rare) can also be found in Egypt on pottery of the 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, e.g. from Bawit (Figure 6a) and Kellia (Bonnet Borrel and Catin 2003, 459, pl. 89.5), and they resemble in style and iconographic details (such as hairstyle) the aforementioned examples of representations from Bawit and Saqqara, dated to the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century. Later

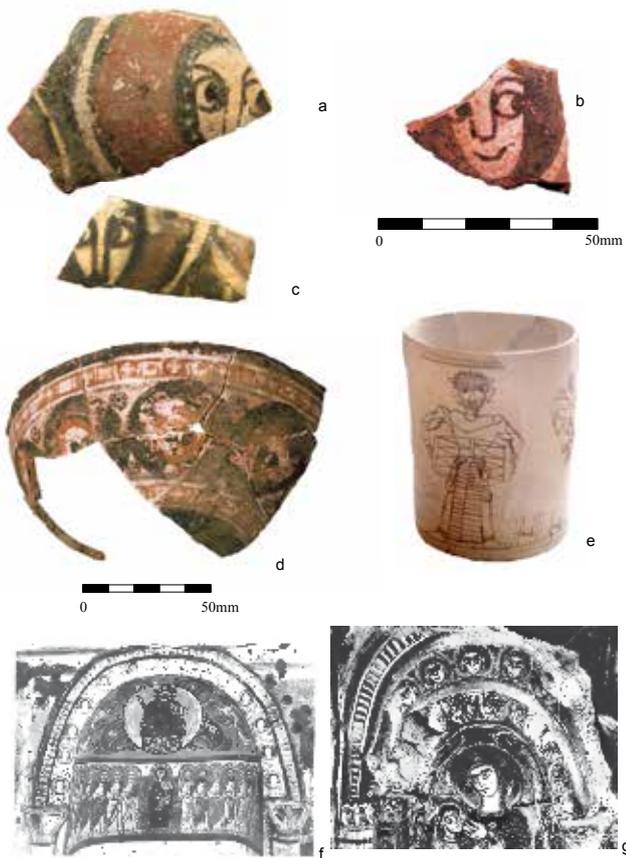


Figure 5. Examples of Soba Ware with painted human faces a-d: (courtesy of D. Welsby SARS Soba Archive), painted human figure on a Meroitic cup e (Sackbo-Autissier 2006, fig. 4) and wall-paintings from the Egyptian monasteries at Bawit f (Maspero 1931, pl. XXLA) and Saqqara g (Quibell 1912, pl. XXII).

human faces or complete figurines reappeared on Egyptian pottery in the Fatimid period and represent the highest quality of ceramic production of luxury Lustre Ware (Watson 2004, 276) (Figure 6c). The style of those depictions was clearly inspired by contemporary wall paintings from Samarra with its influential role as the capital of the caliphate (Figure 6d). A gap of several centuries separates the examples of human representations on the pottery from Meroe and Alwa from the single Makuria specimen dated to the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century AD which was found in Qasr Ibrim (Figure 6f). It can be also compared to the small scale representations on the pieces of decorated plaster that were found in the Monastery on Kom H in Old Dongola (Martens-Czarnecka 2011, 60-61, fig. 9) (Figure 6g). Nevertheless, the style of the aforementioned examples is completely different from the Alwan specimens, showing that the sources of inspiration were rather different from the Egyptian or Makurian ones. Human faces on Soba Ware, especially their geometricised round shape and big eyes strongly pointed to one side, show rather a similarity to the style of Ethiopian wall-painting (Figure 6h) or manuscript illuminations (Appleyard 1993; Chojnacki 1999). It is also worth noting that they could also appear in the representations of angels or seraphim, usually depicted as a row of



Figure 6. Examples of representations of humans on Egyptian pottery a: (Louvre Museum Collection online: E10993, X5527), watercolor copy of the fragment of niche decoration (Figure 5g) from Saqqara b: (Quibell 1912, pl. XXIII); representations of faces on lustre pottery c: (Watson 2004, 276, cat. Ja3, LSN C a-d), two harem wall painting fragments, Samarra, Iraq, 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. d: (British Museum Collection Online: OA+.10621, OA+.10622), on Soba Ware e: (courtesy of D. Welsby SARS Soba Archive), on potsherd from Qasr Ibrim f: (courtesy of D. Welsby SARS Soba Archive) and on wall-paintings from Dongola g: (Martens-Czarnecka 2011, fig. 9, p. 60).

heads. Nevertheless one has to realise that there are no contemporary analogies for such representations in Ethiopian wall-painting; those known date from the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD at the earliest (Balicka-Witakowska 2007, 82).

Despite the possible stylistic similarities with the south, the aforementioned examples from Egypt and Makuria and their similarity with wall paintings allow us to pose the hypothesis that the style of decoration of Soba Ware could reflect the style of contemporary monumental art.

The possibility of connections between Early Alwa and the contemporary Kingdom of Aksum can also be concluded from the similarity in the shape of vessels and the technical aspects of pottery production. The earliest Axumite Red Ware pottery, sometimes with purple-painted decoration, resembles contemporary specimens from Nubia. Biconical bowls (Wildung 1989, 249 fig. 16:109), often equipped with small, pierced handles, placed in the middle of the belly,



have parallels in Alwan forms (Welsby 1998, fig. 46: 6.2), as well as thickened and everted rims (Welsby 1998, fig. 50: 18.1). However, the fine wares in Soba were wheel-made, while Aksumite workshops used handmade technique and no evidence for wheel-use was found, but it is noteworthy that pottery in Soba had a large component of handmade forms, in contrast to Makuria and Nobadia, where handmade production seems to have played a minor role.

There is also similarity in the fabrics used for Soba and Aksum fine wares, where the potters used alluvial clay, while in Makuria and Nobadia desert clays were employed, resembling Meroitic and southern Egyptian production. One of the components, appearing in Alwan and Aksumite fabrics was grog, which was not used in contemporary vessels in Nobadia and Makuria. The decoration and its techniques might be helpful in the understanding of the origins and cultural connections of Soba Ware. The second aforementioned sub-style of Soba Ware consists of black and red motifs composed into continuous bands, painted on the outside of the vessel, just below the rim (Welsby 1998, figs 89, 91, 92, 93) on the background of a light slip. The white or cream slip resembles the fine wares produced in Meroe, as does the location of the decoration and its separation into panel-like style motifs (Adams 1986, fig 125). Such examples appeared on 9<sup>th</sup> century bowls in Old Dongola, while in the case of Soba Ware, they seem to be earlier (see Conclusions) (Figure 8 a-f).

### The End of Soba Ware and the Impact of Northern Traditions

Already by the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD some similarities between the architecture and stone decoration at Soba and that of the northern Kingdom of Makuria can be noticed. It is visible in Church B on mound B at Soba, dated to the second decade of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the plan of which resembles the interior layout of the cathedrals in Faras and Old Dongola, rebuilt in the same period (Welsby 2002, 150, 154; Welsby and Daniels 1991, 34, 37) (Figure 7 a, c and d). This is also the case with a number of column capitals found on this site (Figure 7f) which may derive from the same workshop in one of the main centres of Makuria (Monneret de Villard 1935, tav. XCIX; Zielinska 2016, 47-48; forth.) (Figure 7b, e and f).

Most probably such similarities were also present in the decorative motifs used on the pottery. A very characteristic pattern of a rhomboid net with circles at the intersection of lines can be found on a cross decoration on a Soba Ware vessels (Figure 8e) (Welsby 1998, fig. 81: 1065) and on Makurian

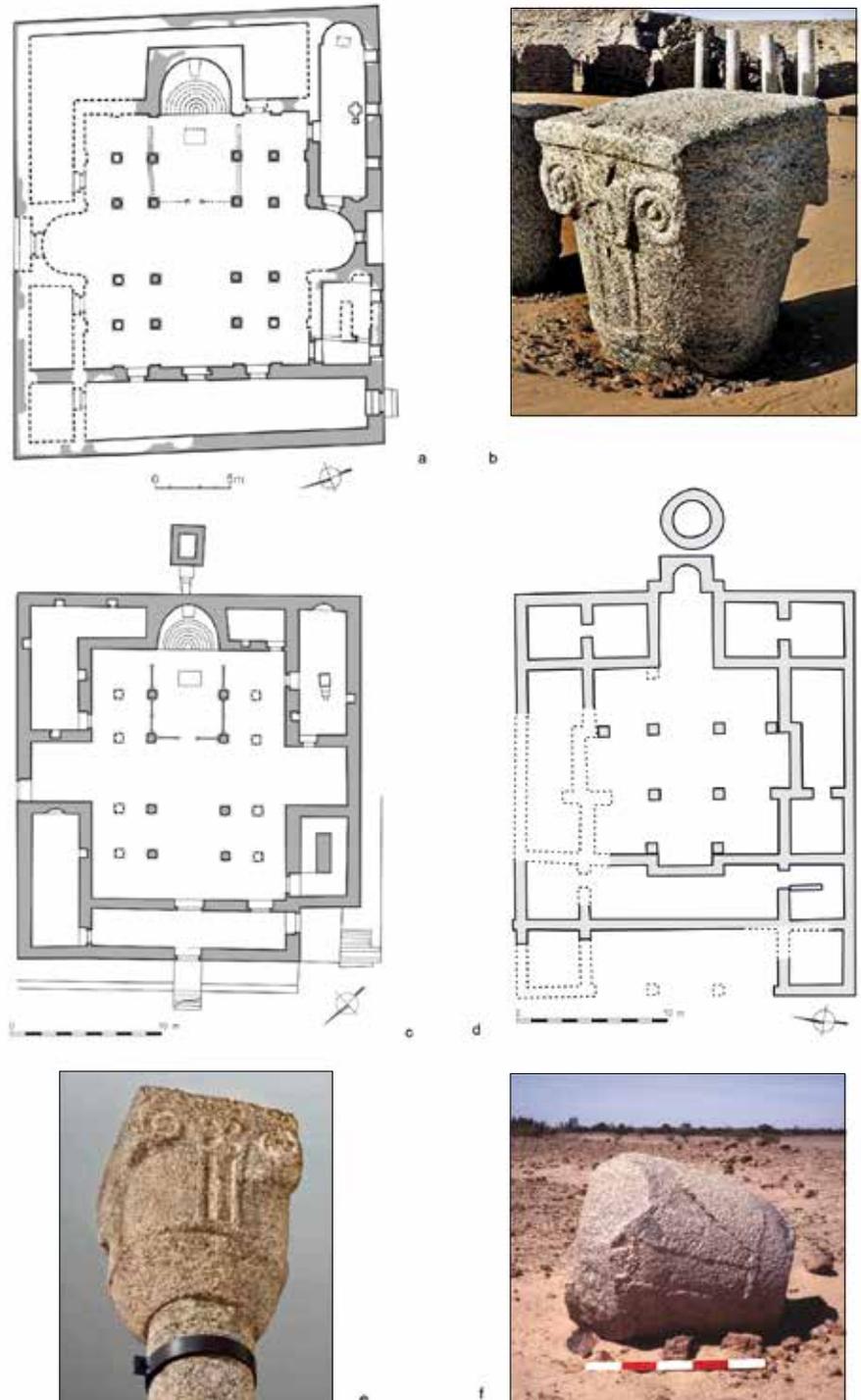


Figure 7. Old Dongola, 'Third Cathedral' end of 7<sup>th</sup>- beg. of 8<sup>th</sup> century. a: (Godlewski 2013, 53); column capital, Old Dongola, 'Third Cathedral' end of 7<sup>th</sup>- beg. of 8<sup>th</sup> century. b: (photo: K. Innemée); Faras, Paulos Cathedral, beg. of 8<sup>th</sup> century. c: (Godlewski 2006, fig. 42); Soba, Church B d: (D. Zielinska, after Welsby and Daniels 1991, fig. 2); Faras, Paulos Cathedral, beg. of 8<sup>th</sup> century. e: (234649 MNW, Zielinska 2016, fig. 4); column capital, Soba, church on Mound C (SARS Soba Archive).

wall-paintings dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Martens-Czarnecka 1982, 19; il.9, 14; I1b:10-13, Zielińska 2010, 697, fig. 5).

The rebuilding of the Faras cathedral following the new concepts developed in Old Dongola is considered to reflect the leading role of the capital of the united kingdom of Nobadia and Makuria (Godlewski 2006, 56-60, 65-66). The influential role of Old Dongola continued with the flourishing of art and a 'renaissance' of indigenous Nubian traditions in the Makurian kingdom that took place sometime in the 9<sup>th</sup> century (see Conclusions).

Could it be that this phenomenon also reached Alwa? In this period can be observed the decline and finally disappearance of Soba Ware with its rich and elaborately painted decoration. The amount of fine wares from this period discovered in Soba was considerably less than from earlier periods. While no painted decoration was recorded, incised or engraved patterns start to be the most common decoration employed. At the same time the number of fine vessels imported from Makuria increased. Most of these bore painted decoration with floral and zoomorphic motifs (Welsby and Daniels 1991, figs 112: 168-179, 138: 568-573, 139), characteristic for the 'Classical' and 'Late' Christian Period, which can be dated



Figure 8. Examples of pottery with panel-like style motifs, cross-hatchings and crosses of Soba Ware a, c and e: (courtesy of D. Welsby SARS Soba Archive) and Dongola White Ware b, d and f: (courtesy of K. Danys PCMA UW Archive) and imports from Dongola found at Soba b (Welsby and Daniels 1991, fig. 138: 571), g and i: (courtesy of D. Welsby SARS Soba Archive).

from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Figure 8g-i). Their intrinsic value to their Alwan owners is evidenced by repairs, very common in the case of imported vessels (Welsby 1991, 11).

The extremely meager remains of the few preserved motifs of decorated plaster do not offer any possibility for deeper analysis. Nearly all the documented fragments of plaster were found in the infill of the Building D (Figure 9) and can be dated to the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century (Edwards 1991, 259; Welsby and Daniels 1991, 34). The most characteristic example of the ornamental frame decorated with plaited motifs (Figure 9a) show links to Makurian workshops (Edwards 1991, fig. 150: 49, 261, 264) and revealed that Alwan trends

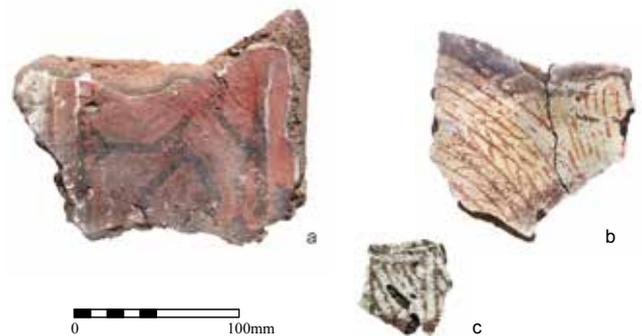


Figure 9. Painted wall plaster from Building D at Soba East (Courtesy SARS Soba Archive).

were contemporary with the ones that appear in the art of Makuria from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Another fragment that probably depicts the structure of a wool or braided grass or reed(?) (Figure 9b) (Edwards 1991, fig. 148: 1-9, 259)<sup>3</sup> can be compared with the style of 12<sup>th</sup> century paintings, like one in the Monastery on Kom H in Old Dongola (Martens-Czarnecka 2011, 72, fig. 84, cat. 94).

## Conclusions

A closer focus on the pottery from Soba can offer a new way towards a better understanding of processes in the art of the Kingdom of Alwa. Its development is better seen in comparison with phenomena that occurred in the neighbouring regions in the period under discussion (Figure 10). It seems that at the beginning pottery workshops possibly continued in production from the Meroitic period, retaining the high quality of the vessels, while decoration was limited to a few standard motifs. This process occurred both in Makuria and Alwa, and reflected less influence from the outside world. A new important link is the apparent contact with Ethiopia and such a link can be an explanation for other similarities in the Soba Ware human face representations. The presence of Axumites in Alwa at the dawn of Christianity was noted by John of Ephesus and the textual evidence indicates their presence already before the official Christianisation of the

<sup>3</sup> This pattern was previously identified by David Edwards as possible fragments of angels' wings, although the analogies which exhibit a still quite simple/modest? style are of an earlier date, from the early period of Makurian art.

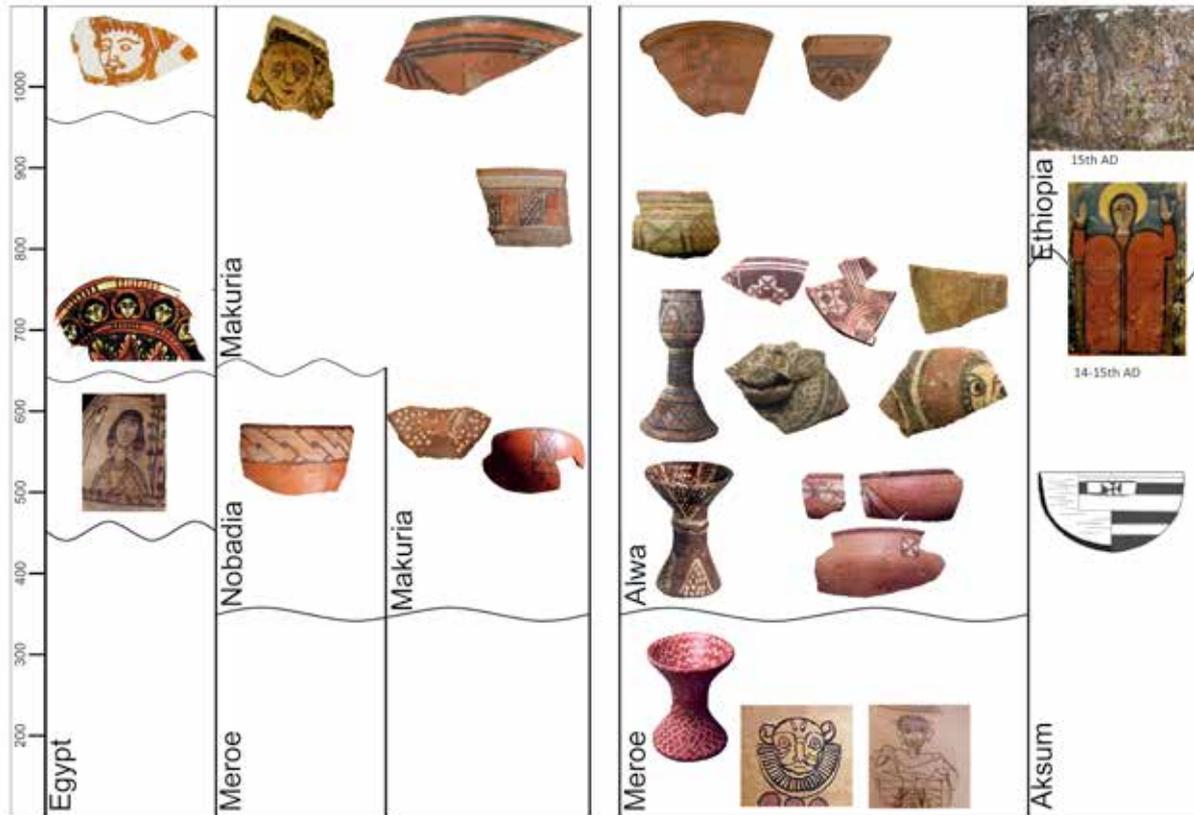


Figure 10. Timeline.

Kingdom of Alwa (Vantini 1975, 20). However, the contacts between Axum and Alwa, suggested by also by G. Hatke, based on the works of Cosmas Indicopleustes and John of Ephesus (Hatke 2013, 152, 162-163), is very poorly reflected in the archaeological record; only a few sherds of the 6<sup>th</sup> century attributed to Soba workshops were found in Aksum (Phillips 1995, 8). Hitherto such contacts were interpreted as of a not very influential character (Fattovich 1978, 84). The stylistic similarities between Alwan representations of human faces and Ethiopian simplified style of much later examples, may be an indication of the survival of Axumite artistic styles into much later periods of Ethiopian art. Some similarities can be found between a number of the potsherds of Soba Ware with the 9<sup>th</sup> century pottery (Figure 8a and c) that occurs in Old Dongola with frieze decoration, separated into panel-like style motifs (Figure 8b, d and f). It is worth noting that a very similar pattern also can be found on fragments with plaster decoration from Soba (Figure 9c). The question of the direction of such influences and connections (from Alwa to Makuria or from Makuria to Alwa) is unresolved. This stylistic trend can be connected with the phenomenon of the ‘renaissance’ of indigenous Nubian traditions in the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD, well seen in designs painted on the pottery, ‘derived’ from Meroitic vessels (Adams 2016, 323). This tendency seemed to be part of a wider change in Makurian art, which can be observed from the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards. New forms in architecture and wall-painting expressed not only a kind of independence of Nubian artists but also a need to present indigenous Nubian concepts (Adams 2016,

323; Zielińska 2016, 49-50; forth.). Some of these elements are interpreted as a reflection of closer relations between Makuria and Alwa from the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD. Włodzimierz Godlewski has suggested that the new type of crown that can be observed in the representations of Makurian rulers from the 11<sup>th</sup> century was derived from Alwan court (Godlewski 2008, 273-74). Could this suggest the strong (if not dominant) position of the Kingdom of Alwa? Following this path, together with the possible, even personal relations of the royal families of Makuria and Alwa, and on the other hand the apparent influence of Makurian architecture and stone decoration in Alwa, can we link the disappearance of the Soba Ware with the decline of the Aksumite state in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, and by the then stronger influx of influences from the Kingdom of Makuria?

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