

# The Egyptian occupation and the indigenous city of Dokki Gel in the early 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty

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## Introduction

When the military commanders of Thutmose I reached Dokki Gel in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century BC, they discovered an impressive city. The architecture differed from Egyptian models, and the military structures must have been awe-inspiring. The Second Cataract forts provided the Egyptians with defensive systems suited to their power, but they were now confronted by incomparable fortifications that required new strategies. This indigenous urban organisation shows a certain complexity, and displays different fronts overlooked by large towers. Instead of thick walls demarcating the protected area, towers represent reinforced spots overlooking the precincts and passages. Designed to include gates, these towers can form alignments to replace the city walls. This situation is all the more surprising since the Nubian fortifications of the neighbouring agglomeration are much more similar to Egyptian works, as its constructions are mainly quadrangular. So what we see in Kerma is the conjunction of three main waves of influence, which are yet to be understood (Figure 1).

If the alliances defending the territory against the advancing Egyptian armies were Nubian, we also get the impression that some of the contingents come from much more distant lands. Of course, one would think about Punt, whose interventions are recorded in a text (Davies 2003a, 52-54; Davies 2003b, 40-41), or about Kassala (Bard and Fattovich 2007; Fattovich 1995; Manzo 2011), Kordofan (Gratien 2013) and Darfur (Arkell 1951; Arkell 1952; McGregor 2011). The powers in Central Sudan between the 3<sup>rd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC are yet to be discovered. More extensive archaeological research needs to be undertaken to understand the forces present in this region. The metropolis of Dokki Gel is thus an enigma, as no other similar example enables us to compare the remains with those found in the Nile basin.

Moreover, we know that the Egyptians had later contacts with the sub-Saharan populations of Central Africa under Thutmose IV (Vercoutter 2010; Leclant 2010). Through careful archaeological study, it is however possible to follow the urbanistic choices already made under Thutmose I. As a first observation, we can follow the unusual continuity between the constructions of the indigenous urban centre and the *menenu*, which reflects an institution of the Egyptian Empire.

The ancient city of Dokki Gel was established with a first precinct distinguished by the double towers of many monumental gates (Bonnet 2013; Bonnet 2015). This urban core is surrounded by very large vestibules placed in front of the main entrances (Figure 2). Palaces are also established

to the exterior, at the foot of the precinct, and represent ceremonial structures linked to temples erected in the centre. These outer monuments must have been protected by bastioned precincts, and it is to the north that we could seek the traces of other defence lines. Strong towers are still associated with the expansion of the dromos. The circular temples partly identified on the same side might be part of a symbolic defence, and this area also seems to be protected by an alignment of large towers of 25-30m in diameter. From the first precinct, one observes defence structures over 200m towards the north. The fortified ensemble is of a considerable size, if we take into account the agricultural zones that have invaded the urbanised sectors in the east-west direction as well as in the south.

Faced with this built ensemble, the design of the *menenu* was integrated into an old topographical layout, while preserving the main components desired by the Egyptian institution (Figure 3). Three Egyptian temples take up the centre of the architectural ensemble (Bonnet and Vallbelle 2018). They probably replaced African places of worship that could not be kept within the consecrated central area without damaging this focal point (Figure 2). However, it is clear that the religious north-east area, protected by walls, was preserved and used for an indigenous cult. The ongoing study indicates that another religious complex located to the north-west also seems to be preserved in the new urban layout. These places of worship were part of the city's topography until the Meroitic period. To some extent, the Egyptians would authorise the worship of other gods, but one must stress that almost all other constructions were carefully razed. The most significant examples are related to the fortifications, the bricks of which were perhaps reused, but where the layers of destruction were used as foundation for the new elevations.

The *menenu* is equipped with an impressive precinct, which in places is about 10m thick. It is strengthened by connected bastions, of which we know only the northern side, where two monumental gates gave access to the Egyptian temples and to the indigenous western religious complex. The central one corresponds to the dromos and to the main pharaonic temple. The gate passing through the bastioned precinct was elevated with four bastions. Three passages were established, and a transverse passage was placed to the north (Figure 4). Ahead of this massive structure, an outer gate was erected, which replaced the former primary axis (Figure 5). A huge hypostyle hall was also built over gates with double towers, which were then decommissioned. This Egyptian dromos preserves the axis of the previous periods. The second north-western gate was established over the towers of the entrance of Vestibule H, and follows the outer profile of these towers, drawing a rather unusual oval plan. The first layer was placed directly over the full mound of the circular foundations, and it is clear that the destruction was immediately followed by the construction of the *menenu* (Figures 1, 2 and 3).

This gate is part of Thutmose I's project, which consisted of structuring the architectural project by associating the

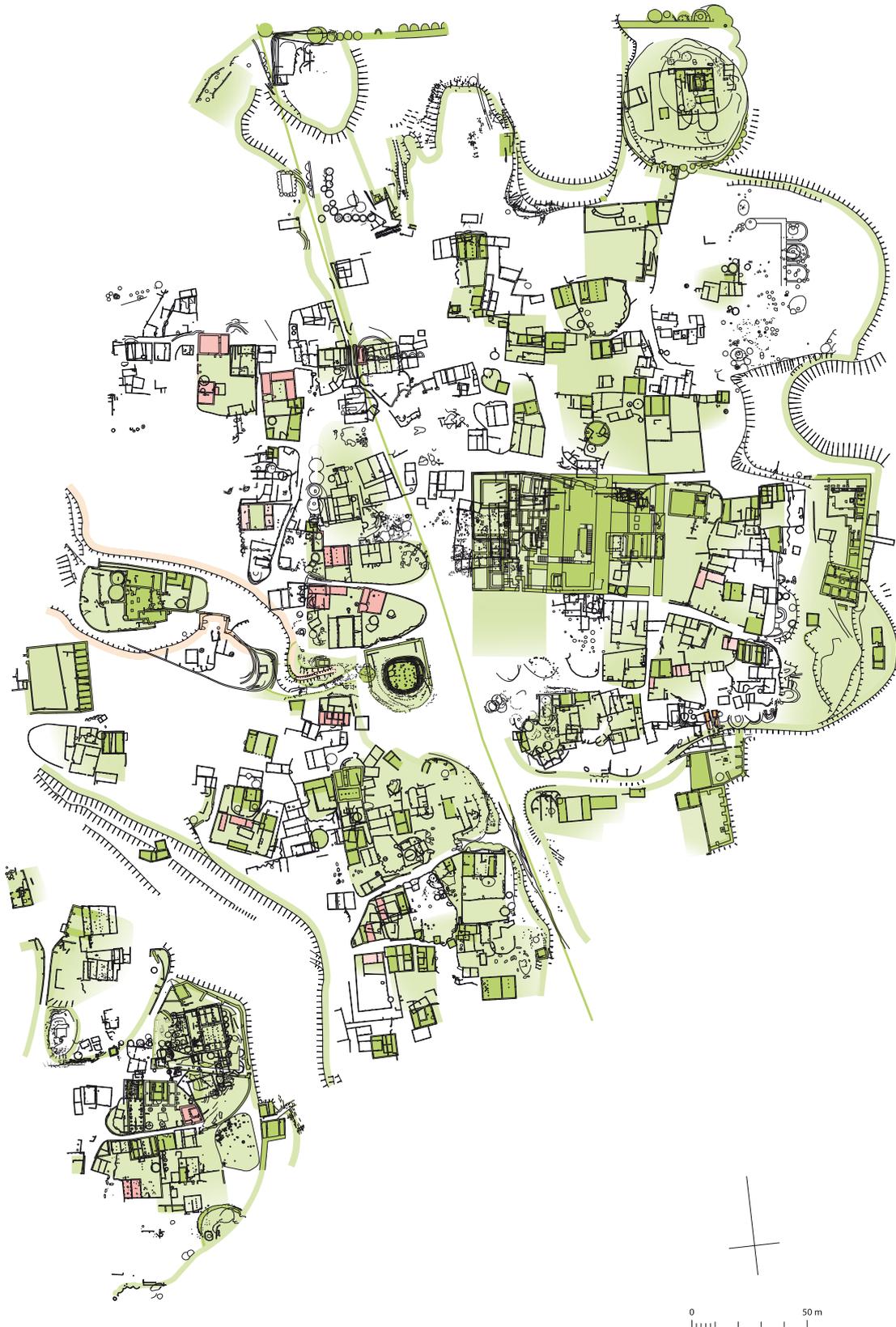


Figure 1. The Nubian architecture of the city of Kerma around 1600–1500 BC  
(drawings: M. Berti, T. Kohler, I. Matter-Horisberger).

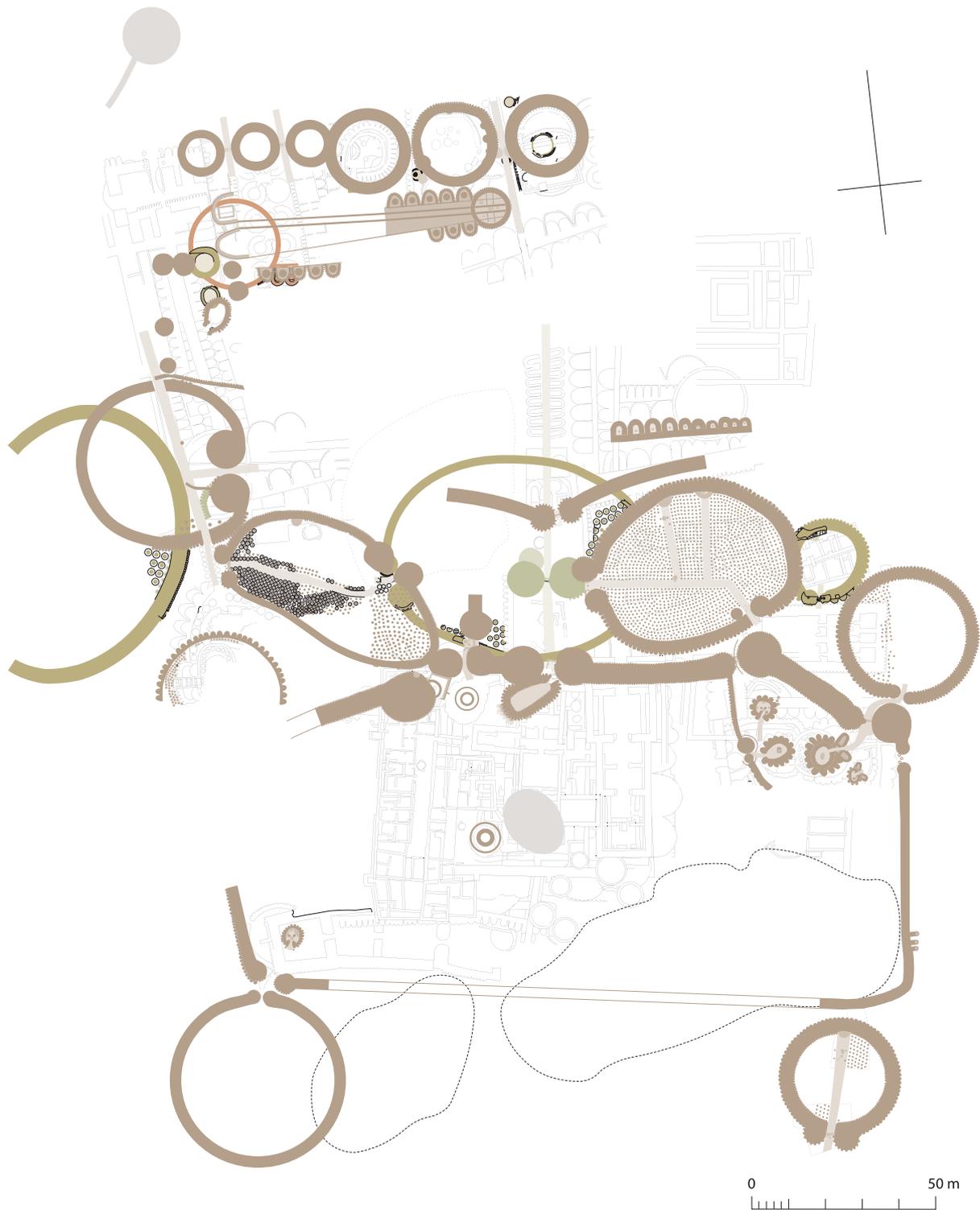


Figure 2. The African architecture of the city of Dokki Gel around 1600–1500 BC  
(drawings: M. Berti, S. Marchi, I. Matter-Horisberger, A. Peillex).

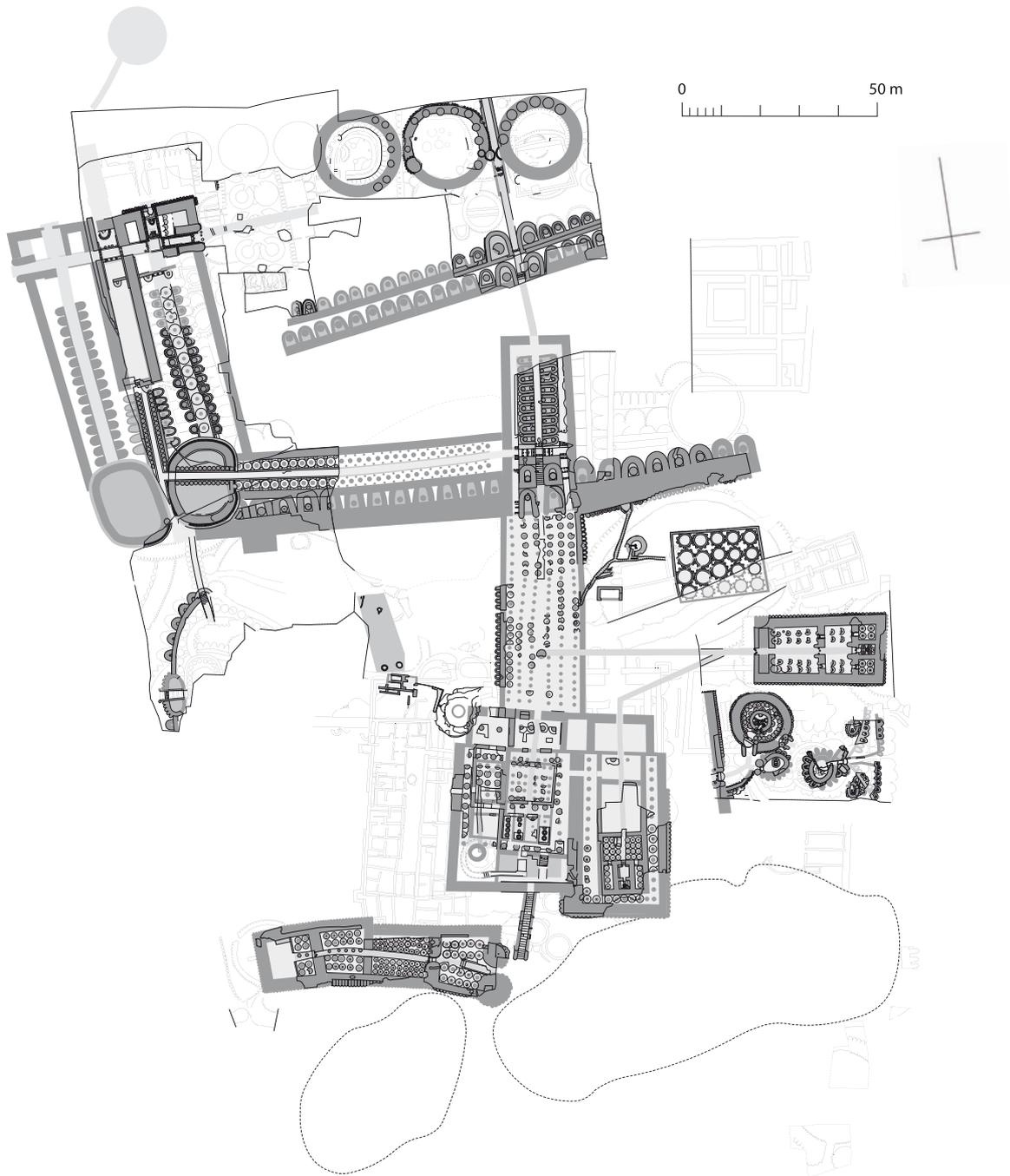


Figure 3. The Egyptian architecture of the menenu of Thutmose I around 1480 BC  
(drawings: M. Berti, S. Marchi, I. Matter-Horisberger, A. Peillec).

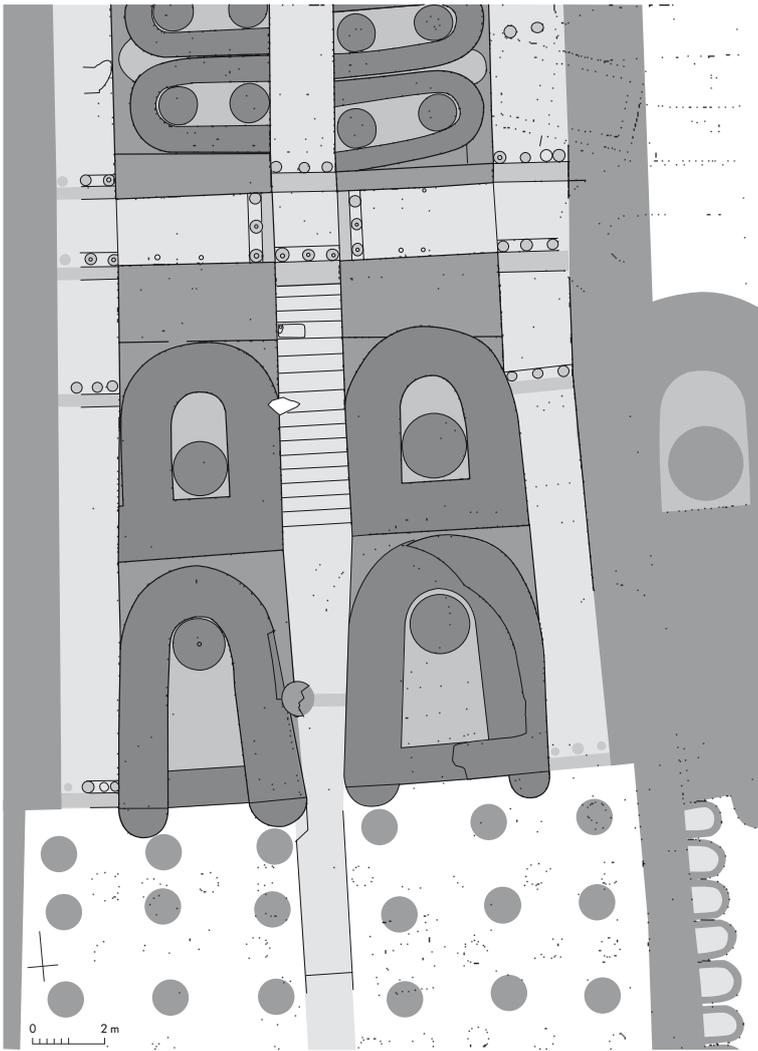


Figure 4. The Egyptian gate north of the central axis (drawings: M. Berti, S. Marchi, I. Matter-Horisberger, A. Peillex).



Plate 1. The menenu of Thutmose I incorporated into a former topographic outline (photo: B.-N. Chagny).

two main northern axes. The two outer gates are connected to extend towards the central aisle, which is equipped on both sides with colonnades (Bonnet, forthcoming). In the middle of the north-western gate, this aisle bifurcates inside the oval tower, almost at a right angle. This peculiar layout also features colonnades within the tower. Beyond this structure, the aisle becomes even more exceptional, as it becomes a pathway between two thick protecting walls linked on each side of the passage by porticoes with columns reinforced with wide circular bases. Each of the bases was surrounded by four small columns. The paved way bordered by low walls is rectilinear. More than 70m long, the construction connects the two gates independently; to the north of the central entrance, a passage corresponds to the point of arrival of the aisle. The connection between the two axes reproduces the circulations towards the main Egyptian temple (Plate 2). However, the passage of the north-western gate towards the south seems to have been shifted, as if one wanted to reduce the importance of the access to the indigenous religious complex.

The Egyptian architects prioritised circulation within the city to enhance the temple devoted to their own Egyptian gods. Indeed, the Nubian and African urbanisation was partly determined by a much earlier layout, currently observable only by a few remains. However, the ceremonial aisle established between the two northern gates underlines new priorities as to the hierarchy of the places of worship (Figure 6). We also get the impression that the defence lines were adjusted according to this layout, and a second precinct was added to the north to protect the area. This double fortification was already established to defend the original city, but the later layout suggests changes in religious choices as well as in military strategy. The efforts observed enable us to compare these structures to the layout of the Egyptian capital, Thebes (Cabrol 2001). We can also see that even if the indigenous religious areas are maintained, they do not benefit from monumental access in the same way, and remain isolated within the urban framework. They have lost their original role, which was significant in the former city. One will notably think of the alignment of temples to the north, which seems to be part of the defence, like the fortifications.

Since our excavations seldom reached the deepest layers, it is not yet possible to understand the development of the African architecture at Dokki Gel. One must note its richness and complexity, but nothing explains its origins. During our last season we discovered a second precinct with towers for gates and a wall strengthened by bastions on each side, which is rather unusual. Indeed, the fortified front towards the exterior is doubled towards the urban core

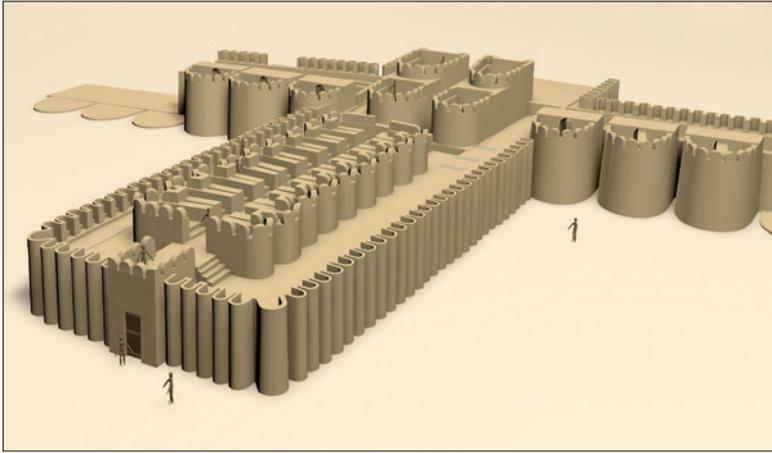


Figure 5. Reconstruction of the northern gate and its outer gate (drawing: M. Berti).

(Figure 7). Pending more complete documentation and more chronological evidence, one must admit that the contacts with Egypt contributed to the establishment of solutions marked by other influences. The typical layouts of the Egyptian forts in Nubia could represent an interesting example. However, the surface traces observed at Dokki Gel suggest that other structures were built around the sectors studied. There might have been fortifications even more remote to the centre, and towers of significant size were apparently protecting the city.

The main features of the Egyptian occupation under Thutmose I suggest that the architects of the *menenu* had to take into account the existing African layout of the urban area. The urban topography was organised along two main axes from the north and the north-west. One can estimate that this layout was necessary, due to the presence of two religious ensembles at Dokki Gel. These must also be followed to the



Plate 2. The ceremonial aisles of the northern entrances of the *menenu* (photo: B.-N. Chagny).

capital of the Kingdom of Kerma, with the *deffufa* in its centre, i.e. the great temple of the ancient city (Bonnet 2014). Perhaps they were also connected to the course of the Nile, as we estimate that they would extend over an elongated island, according to the results of analyses and our geophysical observations. In the sectors studied in Dokki Gel, one may note that the fortified fronts block the whole area on the northern side, and that the two axes are equipped with numerous fortified systems (Figure 8). This endeavour to defend the north of the site while leaving well-protected passages is also found at Kerma. In Dokki Gel, the Egyptians adopted a system of successive fronts. The outer gates display an intent to restrict the movements of the population by trying to control the passages. Perpendicular lines of bastions complete the northern fronts.



Plate 3. General view of the site of Dokki Gel (photo: B.-N. Chagny).

This succession of fortified works conveys the image of an astounding fortress, which underlines the dangers surrounding the trade of goods or the occupation of the territory. They transposed the former Second Cataract defence system to the south, so as to monitor the region. The monumental gates replaced the entrance vestibules where local populations would gather. The small buttresses all along the construction walls, the systematic use of precincts reinforced by connected bastions and the presence of a large number of columns suggest that indigenous earthwork experts or masons must have served the Egyptians, who had adopted the Nubian or African use of mud-brick in architecture. It is more difficult to understand the reconstruction of the circular temples, which evolved architecturally for centuries, of which some phases are glimpsed (Figure 9). It is at Dokki Gel that the new frontier of the Empire was fixed, and the military efforts of the early New Kingdom replaced the Second Cataract barrier. However, this project was reassessed by Thutmose III, who understood that Africa and its richness extended to the south. The monitoring of trade thus enticed the pharaoh to resume

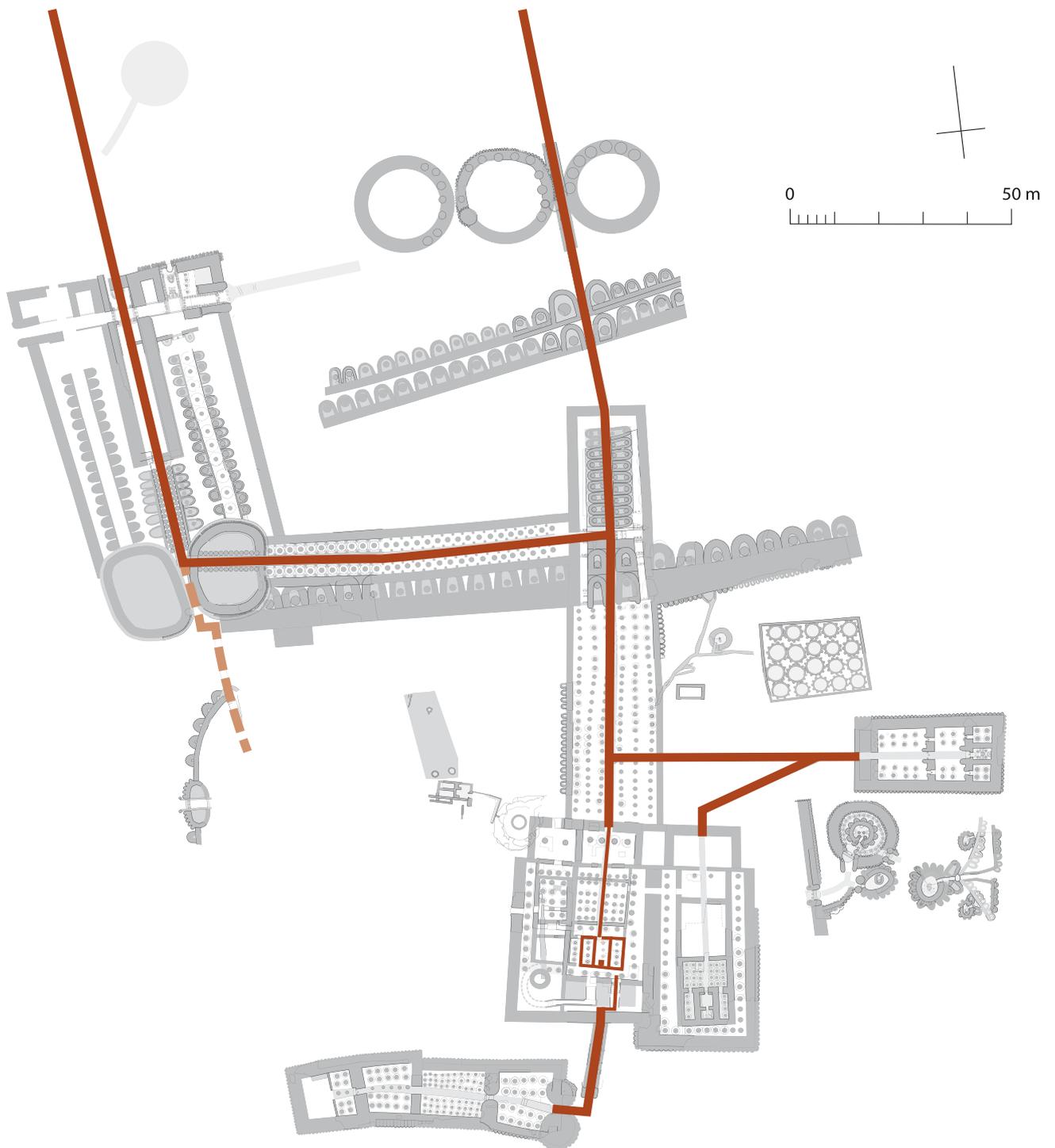


Figure 6. The ceremonial aisles structuring the urban topography under Thutmose I (drawing: M. Berti).

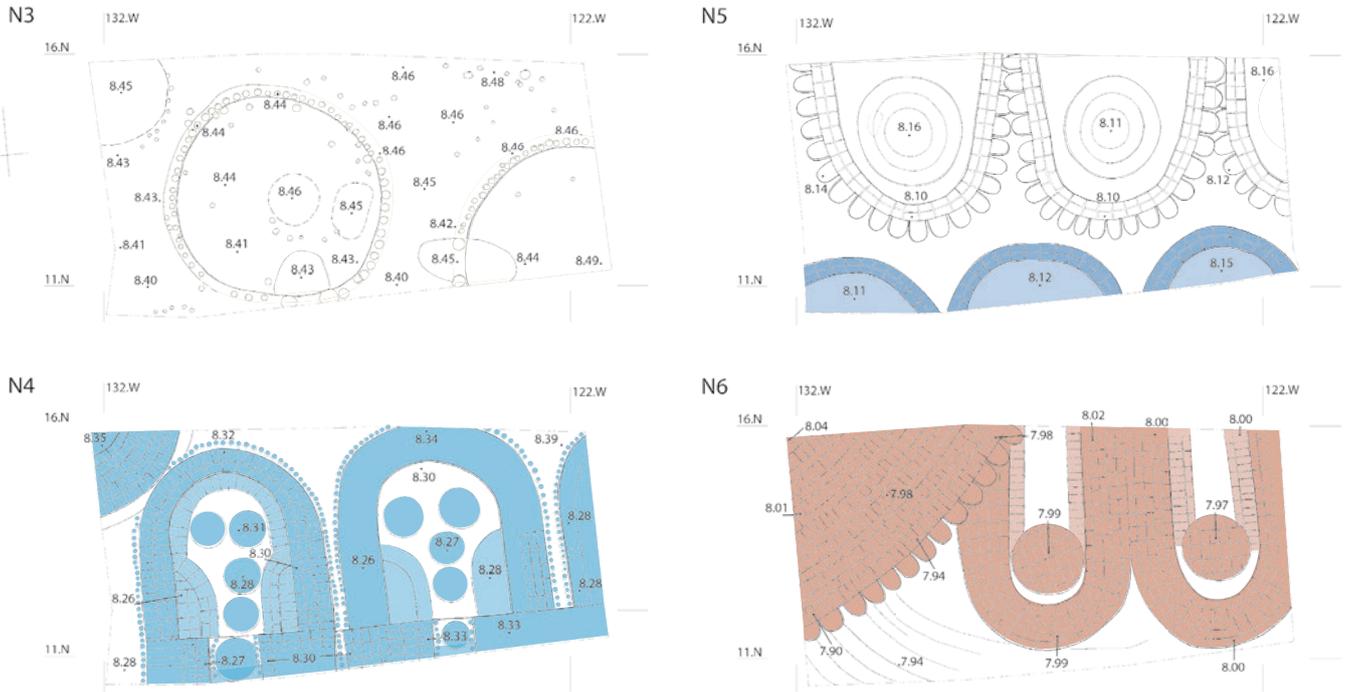


Figure 7. Stratigraphic studies of the northern space. Levels N5 and N4 of the Kerma Classique and N6 of the end of the Kerma Moyen (drawings: O. Devitte, J.-M. Willot).

his conquest towards the sub-Saharan kingdoms, with which new contacts were tied under Thutmose IV.

This analysis of urban development restores the importance of the north-south axis, with the growing influence of the Mediterranean basin and Egypt. As a capital, Kerma was a barrier controlling the power of Nubia and the exchange of exotic products. However, the discovery of Dokki Gel unveils additional forces from the south (Plate

3), and one can imagine that another east-west axis was established in Central Sudan. The Red Sea roads towards Kordofan or Darfur can be extended towards West Africa,

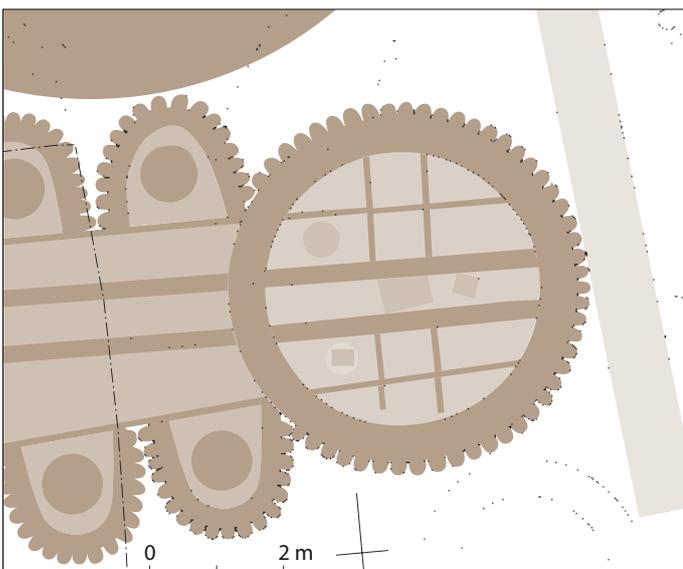


Figure 8. The complex defence system of the Kerma Classique period (around 1600 BC) northern side (drawings: S. Marchi, M. Berti).

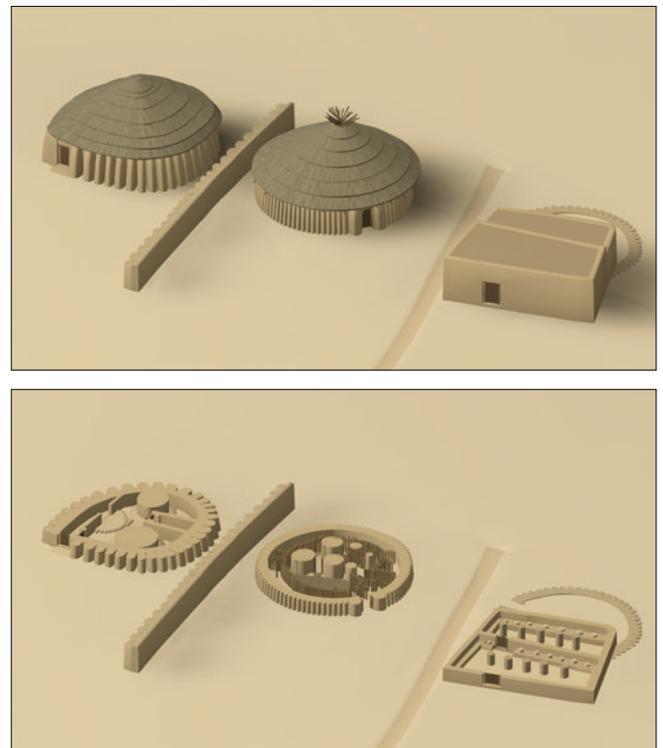


Figure 9. Architectural reconstruction of the northern religious area, with the circular temples or a quadrangular place of worship in the Meroitic period (drawings: M. Berti).

whereas the foundation of independent kingdoms probably shaped the complex origins of the continent as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. Of course, the basis of this chronology must be reconstructed. As it is, everything remains to be done, as the data is missing over a large area, but the archaeological discoveries at Dokki Gel seem to demonstrate the presence of developed societies in Central Africa. We are convinced that from the Egyptian Middle Kingdom or even earlier, new traditions appeared, which changed the organisation of the Nilotic populations, thus linking them to the beginning of the history of Central Africa.

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