

New fieldwork at Soba East (2019-2020 season)

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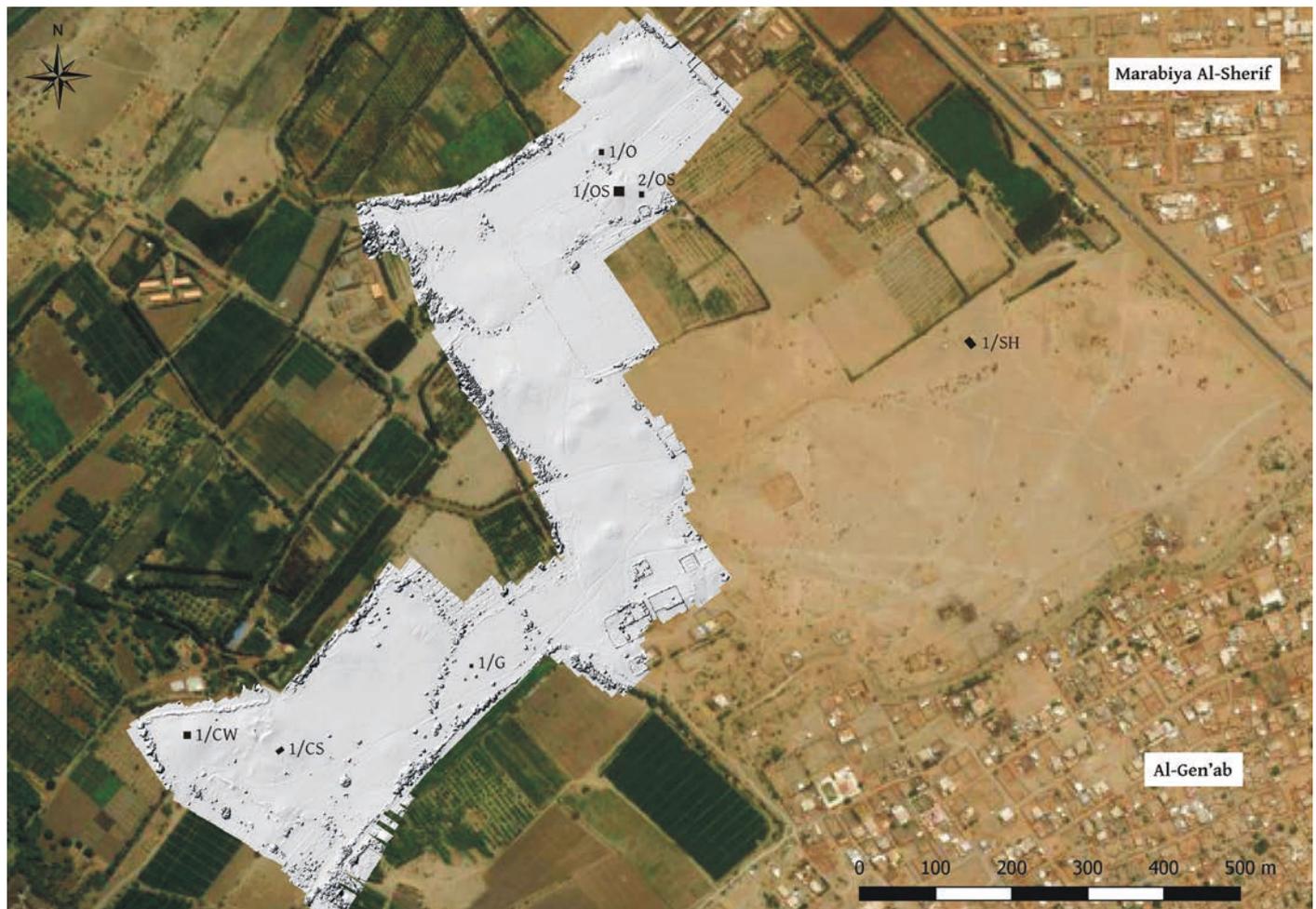


Figure 1. Soba, location of archaeological trenches and areas documented with grayscale digital elevation models in the 2019-2020 season (prepared by Mariusz Drzewiecki, background image Google Earth).

Introduction

In November 2019, new research was initiated at Soba East as part of a project entitled ‘Soba – the heart of the Kingdom of Alwa. The spatial organisation of a Medieval capital city on the Blue Nile’. The three-year program includes extensive fieldwork aimed at collecting information on the distribution of archaeological remains at Soba East (Drzewiecki and Ryndziejewicz 2019). It is the beginning of a large enterprise to resume research on the Medieval period on the Blue Nile.

Soba became a domain of archaeologists in the 20th century (Budge 1907, I, 325; Somers Clarke 1912, 34-38; Shinnie 1961; Welsby and Daniels 1991; Welsby 1998; Abdel Rahman 2000). Despite intensive work and spectacular finds, at the end of the century, only approximately one-percent of the site had been studied in detail (Welsby 1998, 21). In the last 20 years, the region has witnessed extensive urbanisation and agricultural development. The National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums, Sudan and the Khartoum State Ministry of Culture, Information and Tourism have been trying to save and document as much as possible of the medieval capital (Abdelhai Abdelsawi and Hisham Khidir Ahmed Karrar, pers. comm.). However, in 2019 when we started the fieldwork, only 53ha of the once 275ha site were left relatively untouched.

The fieldwork lasted, with a short break, until mid-February 2020. During these months a large-scale geophysical survey was launched, followed by targeted excavations to provide more details on the selected anomalies recorded during the survey (Figure 1). Large numbers of small finds were collected. To house this material, in January

2020 the construction of a storeroom began. The building was to be located next to a police station at the site, so archaeological excavations had to be conducted there before construction started (Trench 1/SH). Simultaneously, an initial ethnological study was undertaken in al-Gen'ab and Marabiya al-Sherif to understand the attitudes that the inhabitants of modern Soba have to the archaeological remains.

Aerial photography

Before geophysical prospection and excavation, systematic documentation by means of aerial photography was undertaken. Vertical and oblique photos as well as video captures were made using a camera suspended under an unmanned aerial vehicle (DJI Mavic Air 2 with Hasselblad camera). Oblique photos recorded the changing landscape of Soba. Vertical photos with ground control points measured by means of a GPS RTK (Topcon Hiper SR) were processed to create 3D-models of the surface of the site (Agisoft Metashape software). Subsequently, digital elevation models (DEMs) and orthomosaics were made, and used throughout the research. All topographical measurements were made using the WGS84 / UTM zone36N coordinate system (EPSG: 32636). The same documentation technique was applied during excavations. Each explored layer in every trench was documented with vertical, oblique and 3D-model aerial photographs. The aerial video captures of the fieldwork and the landscape were integrated to create movie clips promoting Sudan's heritage and our research. The films, as well as selected aerial photos from the fieldwork, can be found on the project website (www.soba.uw.edu.pl).

Geophysical Survey

The archaeo-geophysical approach, which is increasingly in use in Sudan (e.g. Spencer 2009; Mohamed-Ali *et al.* 2012; Ullrich and Wolf 2015; Herbich and Ryndziewicz 2019) has also been adapted to the needs of the research program in Soba. The goal was to obtain information that would allow for a better understanding of the urban structure of the medieval city, and therefore the location of particular districts, as well as plans for individual buildings and other elements of the town, such as streets, industrial areas and empty spaces.

A preliminary pilot study conducted in January 2018 on a small gravel mound (80x40m) in Area BW proved the potential of fluxgate gradiometry in prospecting the site (Drzewiecki and Ryndziewicz 2019, 323-329). The method turned out to be responsive not only in the region of the mound that was examined, but also on a flat area at its foot, which revealed a network of regular anomalies interpreted as the remains of walls. Assuming that similar conditions exist in other parts of the site, it has become clear that the extension of research provides an opportunity to obtain a holistic plan of the preserved urban structures in Soba.

The current research project assumes that it will be possible to take geophysical measurements over the entire available area of the site.¹ This article presents the results of the first stage of research, conducted in the 2019/2020 season. We decided to use two geophysical methods: magnetometry² as the primary method, as well as ground penetrating radar (GPR),³ to obtain more detailed information in areas where the fluxgate gradiometer data suggested the existence of a particularly well-preserved urban complex.

The magnetometry, by registering the Earth's magnetic field disturbances, allows for the detection of objects and layers located immediately beneath the surface and characterised by a different magnetism than their surroundings (see Aspinall, Gaffney and Schmidt 2008; Fassbinder 2015). The use of magnetometry to investigate buried archaeological remains in the Nile Valley is particularly suitable on account of the favorable magnetic properties of the Nile mud sediments – the main component of mud bricks (Herbich 2019, 197). In Soba, high resolution grey scale plots showing the distribution of changes of the intensity of the vertical component of the Earth's magnetic field were obtained as a result, in which the negative values correspond to light tones and the positive ones to dark tones (Figure 2).

¹Geophysical team in 2019/2020 season: Krzysztof Kiersnowski – magnetic survey (independent), Dr Łukasz Banaszek – topographical survey (Historic Environment Scotland), Tomasz Herbich – GPR measurements (Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences) and Robert Ryndziewicz – head of geophysical part of the Project (Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences).

²For the magnetometry, the Bartington Grad 601 fluxgate gradiometer in a dual probes configuration was used. The measurements were made along profiles spaced 0.5m apart with a sampling density of 0.25m and a resolution of 0.1nT, covering a total area of about 20.5ha. Data processing and visualization were performed with Geoscan Research Geoplot 4.0 software.

³GPR measurements were performed with a Malá GX HDR system equipped with a 450 MHz shielded antenna. Measurements were made every 0.025m along parallel traverses separated from each other by 0.5m covering a total area of about 4.4ha. The WAVE software (provided by Jarosław Majewski, gpr.software, Poland) was used to process the data.

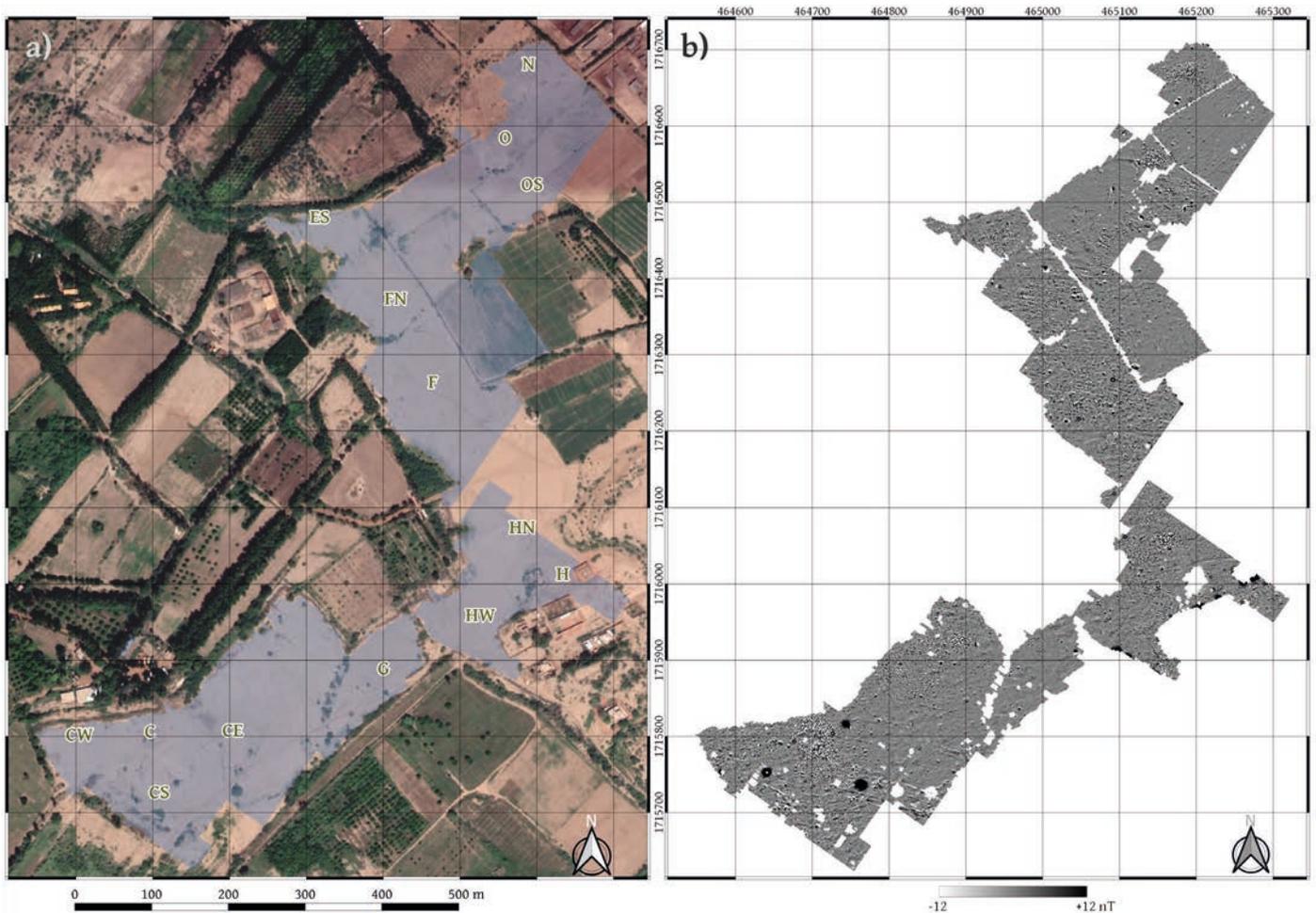


Figure 2. Magnetic Survey in Soba; a) area surveyed in 2019/2020 season (background image: Google Earth), b) grayscale plot of the magnetic data, dynamics: $-12/+12$ nT, coordinate system: WGS84 / UTM zone36N [EPSG: 32636] (prepared by Robert Ryndziewicz).

The GPR provides information about the underground remains of human activities based on measurements of a returning signal from the high-frequency electromagnetic wave emitted into the ground. The signal, when reflected from the boundaries of deposits with different electrical properties, is recorded as a dataset. Accurate registration of time from wave emission to registration of its reflection allows us to determine the depth where reflection appears (see Conyers 2012). The data obtained in Soba was filtered and transformed into horizontal maps illustrating changes in the distribution of electromagnetic wave reflections' amplitude at various depth levels (Goodman, Nishimura and Rogers 1995).

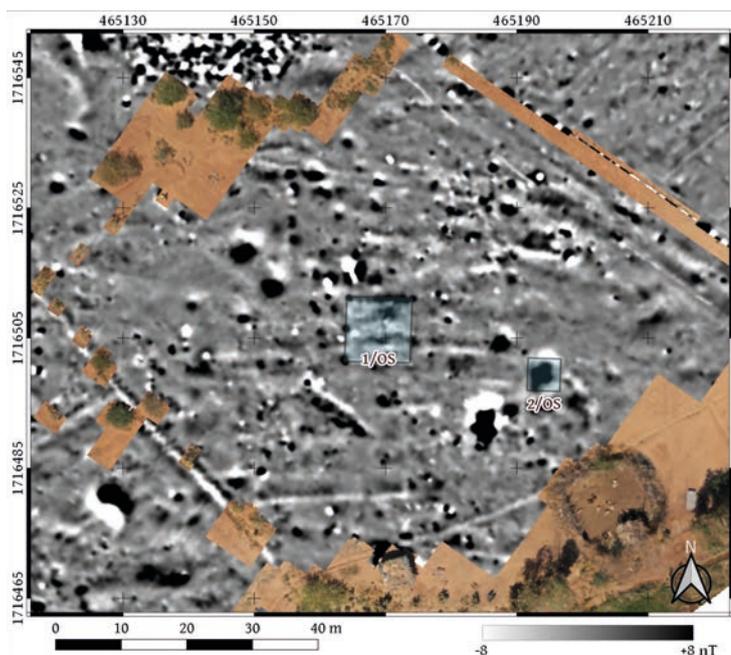


Figure 3. Area OS. Grayscale plot of the magnetic data with location of the trenches, dynamics: $-8/+8$ nT, coordinate system: WGS84 / UTM zone36N [EPSG: 32636] (prepared by Robert Ryndziewicz, background image: orthomosaic by Mariusz Drzewiecki).

Magnetometry and GPR data were imported into the GIS system (Quantum GIS) and georeferenced in a grid established using GPS RTK. Complementary analysis of data was focused on identifying features that are of archaeological interest. To determine the nature of the structures that give the geophysical response, besides information already available in the literature (Shinnie 1961; Welsby and Daniels 1991; Welsby 1998), data from aerial survey and excavations was taken into consideration. In order

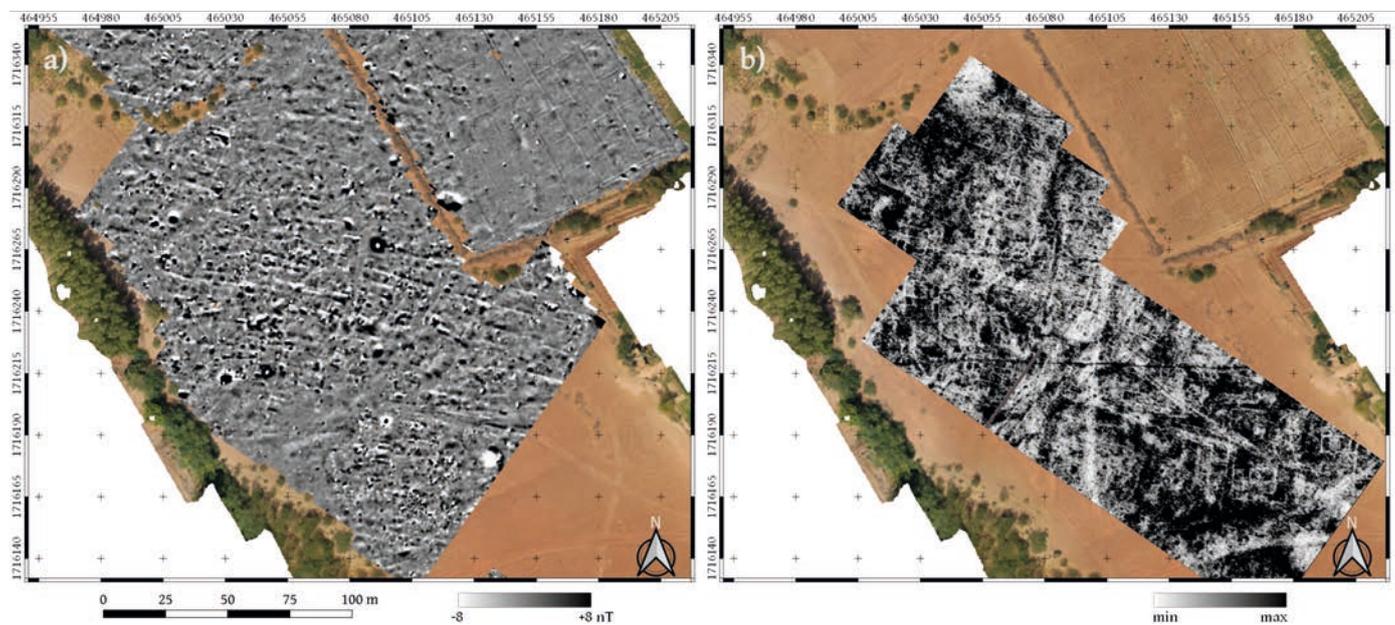


Figure 4. Area F. a) Grayscale plot of the magnetic data, dynamics: $-8/+8$ nT, b) Grayscale plot of the GPR data – timeslice at estimated depth 0.4-0.6 m. Coordinate system: WGS84 / UTM zone 36N [EPSG: 32636] (prepared by Robert Ryndziewicz, background image: orthomosaic by Mariusz Drzewiecki).

to embed the thus created interpretation into the context of the landscape, the impact of natural features and disturbances caused by modern land use was also assessed.

Among the parts of the site examined so far, one of the most interesting cases is the area within Kom OS, examined by fluxgate gradiometer (Figure 3). There a visible set of linear anomalies indicates the remains of buildings. Their layout corresponds precisely to mud brick walls revealed in Trench 1/OS, situated on the top of the mound. In the surroundings, some high amplitude, circular anomalies were interpreted as the remains of furnaces or dumps of ashes. One was verified in Trench 2/OS as being the remains of a lime kiln. Geophysical surveys did not, however, reveal the presence of graves, recorded just below the surface in both excavation trenches.

The survey of Area F provided an impressive dataset (Figure 4). The very clear concentration of linear anomalies seen on the magnetometry data, similar to the recordings in Area OS, suggest the existence of architectural remains densely covering this wide area. Based on the data, a clear plan of this district can be obtained, as well as a reconstruction of the plans of numerous buildings and a partial reconstruction of the street layout. The northern part of Area F is currently an arable field. The noticeably less readable magnetometry data indicates that shallowly located building remains in this area have been destroyed by ploughing.

The geophysical surveys discussed above have considerable potential for identifying Soba's spatial organisation. The main limitations of the geophysical methods used in this project are: the magnetometer's significant sensitivity to red brick debris scattered on the surface in many places, which causes very strong interference and disturbance; and in the case of GPR, the effective prospection depth is significantly reduced by strong soil attenuation. Despite this, in addition to being one main goal of the project, the geophysical research also helped to evaluate the condition and state of preservation of the site, which could be useful when planning future research and in developing protection strategies.

Excavations

During the first excavation season in Soba 2019/2020, seven trenches were opened. The main aims of the excavations were the identification of chronology, architecture and function of selected areas as well as verification of the results provided by non-invasive methods (magnetometry and GPR survey). The total researched area was 269m². The referencing system used continues the convention developed by previous researchers (Welsby and Daniels 1991; Welsby 1998), thus the numerical prefix indicates the number of each trench in a particular area and the letters identify the area.

Trench 1/OS

Trench 1/OS was established on the top of Mound OS. In the 1980s, the area was surface cleaned by Daniels (Welsby and Daniels 1991, 21). Remains of mud brick architecture were reported a few centimetres under the ground. Initially the dimensions of Trench 1/OS were 10x10m. The excavation was completed at the level of virgin soil at c. 2.3m below the surface.

Upon the discovery of mud-brick architecture, the excavation was limited to the central feature with dimensions of 4x5m (Figure 5). Five occupational phases were distinguished: (1) occupational phase before the erection of mud-brick architecture; (2) the construction of the eastern wall of the central feature; (3) construction of the north and south walls of the central feature, (4) the end of use of the central feature; and (5) transformation of the area into a cemetery.

An entrance was discovered in the north wall of the room, the walls of which were covered with red plaster (phase 3). Excavations yielded a large amount of pottery as well as faunal remains, stone tools, beads and a few metal objects. Among others, fragments of a decorated ceramic censer, as well as a piece of ceramic casting mould (?) and several inscribed fragments of pottery were recorded.

Trench 2/OS

Trench 2/OS, measuring 5x5m and 1.5m deep, was located in the eastern part of Mound OS, in the area where a large circular-shaped magnetic anomaly was recorded. During excavations the anomalies were identified as the remnants of a lime kiln (Figure 6). Adjacent mud-brick walls might have constituted the remains of associated buildings, while the pit itself was filled with red-burnt silt (possibly the remnants of the kiln lining impacted by long-term use of fire), a thick layer of lime and another made of tightly packed stones. Burials cut into the topmost layers of the trench. Among numerous finds a fragment of an iron ring and several inscribed fragments of pottery, as well as dozens of beads, were recorded (the latter mostly in funerary contexts).

Trench 1/O

This 5x5m trench was located in the eastern part of Mound O. The surface of the *kom* was covered with red brick debris, making it impenetrable to the magnetic survey. As suggested by previous research, the remains of redbrick architecture could be expected in the area (Welsby and Daniels 1991, 21). The remains were, however, heavily disturbed as was confirmed upon the discovery of only a partially preserved redbrick floor, as well as an adjacent occupation surface of compacted silt. Natural soil was encountered at a depth of c. 1m.



Figure 5. Trench 1/OS after the end of excavation. Mudbrick architecture is visible on the surface. The central feature filled with lime, tightly packed stone deposit and fragments of was excavated down to the bedrock (photo by Mariusz Drzewiecki).
Figure 6. Lime production zone lined with mud-brick walls and red-burnt silt (possibly caused by long-term use of fire), facing southwest (photo by Tomasz Michalik).

Trench 1/SH

This rectangular trench measuring 10x5m was established in close proximity to the police station at the future construction site of the storeroom. Both mud-brick and wooden-structures were uncovered in the trench. At a depth of c. 100mm, remains of two walls forming a corner of a structure were found protruding from the northern part of the eastern side of the trench. Five wooden posts forming a corner of a temporary shelter (possibly of wattle-and-daub construction) next to the mud-brick structure were set on a surface made of trampled mud(?) c. 0.50m below the modern ground surface. Dozens of post-holes of different sizes were recorded on the same level, along with large amounts of ash and burnt organics (including plant remains). A single, probably much earlier burial was found cutting into natural geological subsoil in the south-east corner of the trench.

Trench 1/CW

Area C, where stone columns protrude from the ground, has been investigated numerous times since the end of the 19th century. The most recent research was carried out in the 1980s (Welsby and Daniels 1991, 14-16), yielding early medieval ceramics. Geophysical survey provided anomaly maps which were not very clear in comparison to Area F. The maps suggested that there are at least two phases of architectural remains in the area, one organized on a north-south axis and the other on a NE-SW line.

In the area to the west of the columns, a 5x5m square was excavated down to a depth of c. 1.6m. Four main phases were distinguished in the process of excavation. The earliest was represented by a set of mud-brick walls oriented NE-SW. An abundance of finds was collected: large amounts of pottery sherds (including fineware with elaborately painted decoration), stone tools and clay beads. Additionally, two inscribed fragments of pottery vessels were found.

The second phase was associated with a succession of occupation surfaces and remains of wooden constructions. At a depth of c. 0.6m a mud floor was cut by dozens of post-holes. The occupation surfaces were covered with a thick layer of ash with lots of burnt palm wood, pieces of charcoal and animal bones, along with a multitude of pottery fragments (both painted, good quality wares and coarse cooking pots).

The third phase of activity was represented by the remains of a poorly preserved mud-brick wall running north-south along the central axis of Trench 1/CW, uncovered immediately below the modern ground level. Additionally, two walls were located in the northwest corner of the trench, one running parallel to, the other protruding perpendicularly from, the western section, forming a small enclosed space in the northwest corner (Figure 7).

The occupation remains were cut by a trench dug from the topsoil level and reaching to the remains of mud brick architecture. It was probably a large robber pit (Phase four). In this context, a mix of various types of material, including animal bones with traces of thermal processing and an abundance of ceramics, but no complete vessels were recorded. In addition, 21 fully preserved mud-stoppers have been found in the fill of the pit.



Figure 7. Trench 1/CW after the end of excavations. On the photograph constructions from the 1st and 3rd phases are visible (photo by Mariusz Drzewiecki).

Trench 1/CS

This is located to the south of Church C, in one of the few places where the remains of red brick architecture are visible on the surface. The geophysical survey recorded regular anomalies in the vicinity, suggesting the presence of a large complex. The rectangular trench (5x7m, 1.2m deep) was filled with construction debris, i.e. fragments of red brick, mixed with pottery, animal bones and occasional beads and stone tools. The fill of the trench may belong to the debris left after the dismantling of red-brick structures. The architecture visible on the surface turned out to be a single line of bricks, the eroded remains of a building that once stood there. The magnetic survey proved unsuccessful in this area due to large concentrations of red brick debris.

Trench 1/G

Area G was chosen for testing (trench 3x3m) based on the results of the magnetometric research, which revealed a number of oval anomalies. Excavation of subsurface layers yielded moderate amounts of pottery sherds and an incredibly compacted level of brownish silt with an admixture of lime c. 100mm below the modern ground surface. Natural factors behind the formation of such a compressed layer just below the surface remain obscure. The excavations were stopped at this level without identification of the source of the anomaly.

Pottery from Trenches 1/O, 1/OS, 2/OS – preliminary discussion

Pottery examined so far comes from Trenches 2/OS and 1/O. Ceramics from 1/OS have been only partially studied (Drzewiecki *et al.* 2020, 19-30). Presented below are the main types of vessels recorded in these locations in the context of previous research carried out in the 1980s and 1990s (Welsby and Daniels 1991; Welsby 1998).

The pottery assemblage from the three trenches is similar, consisting mainly of handmade wares from a range of forms of storage jars, cooking pots and bowls. Small black and red slipped bowls were in the minority. Wheelmade pottery consisted mainly of large jars (Figure 8e). Amphorae, probably *qawadi* sherds and small bowls are much less represented among the wheel made material. Fine wares, such as painted bowls, were present only as a few small fragments. Imported pottery is scarce: one diagnostic fragment, probably Late Roman Amphora 1, was recorded (Figure 8c).

The largest group are fragments of globular plain cooking jars, with soot and fire traces on the external surface (Figure 10d) and large, heavy shallow bowls (*dokka*). The bowls were burnished on the internal surface (Figure 9a), the colour of the surfaces is brown or black. These vessels correspond to *dokka* of Class K excavated on mound B and are similar in size. Examples discovered on Mound B had diameters between c. 0.3-1m (Welsby and Daniels 1991, 179) while examples discovered here have diameters of approx. 0.6-0.8m. They were recorded in large numbers in all three trenches.

A small amount of ‘cooking’ bowls with mat-impressed pattern on the external surface were recorded in archaeological deposits (Figure 10c). Such bowls are known from Post-Meroitic times and are recorded mainly in burial contexts (Phillips and El-Tayeb 2003, 460-62; Klimaszewska-Drabot 2010a, 221, Fig. 3.4; 2010b, 482-484).

Jars with a wide, flared rim and narrow neck, often with incised decoration below the rim (Figure 8a, b and Figure 9b) are quite numerous in all three locations. They correspond to the pottery of Class A discovered on Mound B (Welsby and Daniels 1991, 165-168). The jars were probably used for liquids (Welsby 1991, 13).

Black jars with burnished plain surfaces and grooved decoration were noted (Figure 9e, f and Figure 10a, b), sometimes with incised and punctuated ornamentation below the rim and in the middle of the body. Such jars are very common, and correspond to the Class L, types 37, 39 and 43 (Welsby and Daniels 1991, 179, 185, 187 Fig. 98).

Small bowls, mainly black and burnished (Figure 9g), sometimes red slipped, are also present in the examined contexts but they are not so abundant. They correspond to Class N and types 190.3, 194.1 (Welsby and Daniels 1991, 193, 198, 87; 1998, 107, 112-113).

Carinated black burnished bowls (Figure 8d) with incised decoration below the rim on the external surface are present in small quantities and correspond to the sharply carinated bowls of Class N (Welsby and Daniels 1998, 98, Fig. 46; 112).

Among the painted pottery, which were noted in a small amount, the most characteristic pottery ‘Soba ware’ was discovered only in a very few small pieces (Figure 9d).

An important issue which should be pointed out here is the reuse of pottery for other purposes. In Trenches 1/OS and 2/OS, many examples were noticed (see Figure 9h, i). Sherds were re-shaped into discs to be used for example as plugs. They were made from various types of vessels, jars, cooking pots and imported amphorae. Re-shaped sherds with a perforation in the middle could have been used as spindle whorls. Reused pottery was noticed in earlier excavations at Soba, where amphorae necks were recycled as pipes, and many pottery sherds were reused as lids, counters, spindle whorls and ostraca (Welsby 1998, 90).

Burials

During the archaeological fieldwork in the 2019/2020 season 25 burials were uncovered. They were initially recorded

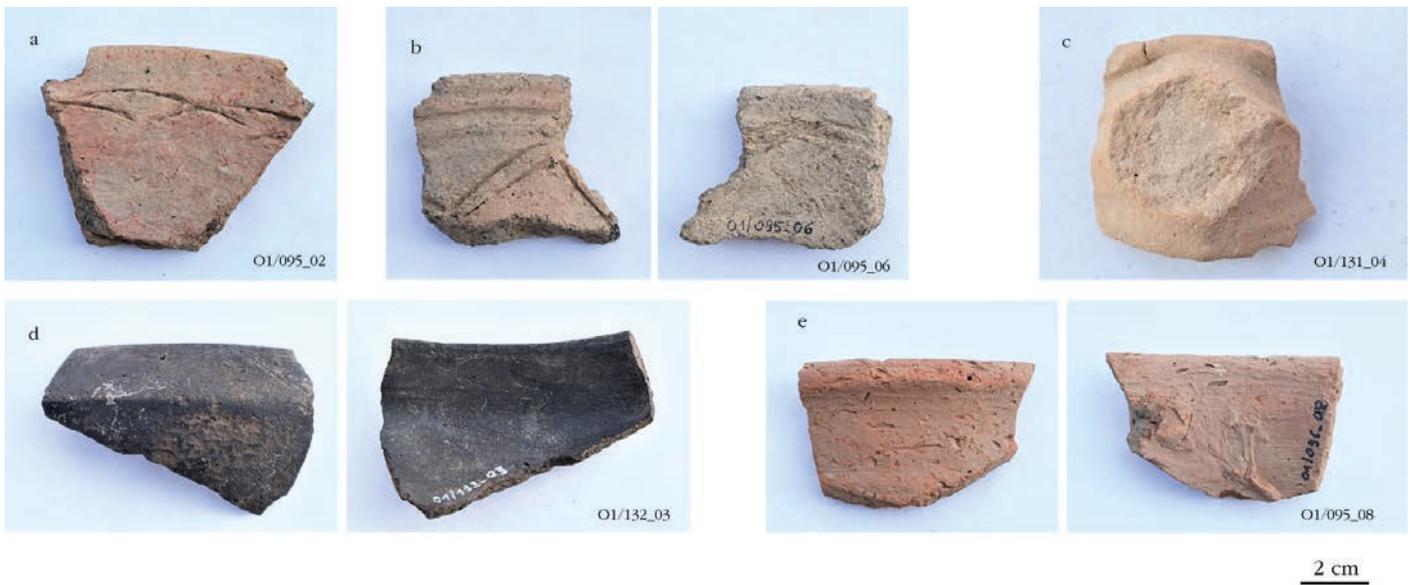


Figure 8. Examples of pottery from Trench 1/O (photo by Joanna A. Ciesielska).



Figure 9. Examples of pottery from Trench 1/OS (photo by Joanna A. Ciesielska).



Figure 10. Examples of pottery from Trench 2/OS (photo by Joanna A. Ciesielska).

in situ and excavated by an anthropologist, followed by sampling of organic matter for radiocarbon dating. Human remains were subjected to detailed anthropological analysis. Standard osteological techniques were applied for the estimation of age and sex, and dental health was described, as well as the recording of all observed pathological conditions (Buikstra and Ubelaker 1994; Shaefer *et al.* 2009; White *et al.* 2011 and sources cited therein). When available, skeletal and dental tissues were sampled for isotopic analysis of diet and mobility.

Most of the burials (23 out of 25) were found in the upper layers of Kom OS. A small cemetery seems to have extended over the top of the mound and down to its foot, as some of the graves were also found in Trench 2/OS. All burials were interred in simple oval pits, with no accompanying funerary structures.

According to the common Christian practice (Welsby 2002, 48-61), most of the deceased were aligned along the E-W axis with the head to the west. While some remains were clearly placed in an extended supine position, others rest on either the right or left side, or even ventrally. At least two burials (Graves 13 and 14) follow a N-S orientation instead of E-W. Some of the deceased must have originally been wrapped in shrouds or buried in clothing, as tiny pieces of dark brown, coarsely woven fabric were recorded next to the remains. Large fragments of a globular cooking pot were employed to protect the head and pelvis of an adult woman buried in Grave 16 in the northern part of Trench 1/OS (Figure 11). While widespread in Christian Nubia, the practice of protecting the head of the deceased was not observed in any other burial on the site.

Among 15 assemblages of human remains belonging to adult individuals, two were identified as male and nine as female. Additionally, the remains of seven children were recovered. Burials uncovered on Kom OS appear to be roughly contemporary, all of them being cut from the same level into the earlier architecture, but not interfering with each other. Considering the context and the mixed orientation of the burials, it is currently hypothesised that



Figure 11. Burial of an adult woman in Grave 16 with head and pelvis covered with fragments of a large globular cooking pot (photo by Tomasz Michalik).



Figure 12. Burial of an adult male interred in a contracted position in a small oval pit cut into the natural rock underneath Trench 1/SH, possibly of very early date (Neolithic?) (photo Joanna A. Ciesielska).

on pubic symphysis and auricular surface morphology, see Buisktra and Ubelaker 1994) were interred in a contracted position, lying on his right side with the legs completely bent and hands folded together next to the pelvis, elbows pointing outward. Both the archaeological context and body positioning (contrasting with Christian custom of extended supine burials) suggest a much earlier dating.

Ethnological interviews provided information on the location of a potentially large cemetery south-east of Mound B, currently on the other side of the tarmac road, under modern buildings. Residents of the area stated that human remains have been uncovered there. The matter, however, requires further research.

Archaeological site, transgression and cultural memory in a Sudanese township

Visible archaeological sites have always been important in Sudan. Being an integral part of local 'mystical geography', they were usually ambivalent and liminal spaces. Many of these sites were linked to taboos and magical rites or gave rise to legends or beliefs in spirits and hidden treasures. At the same time, they were respected and protected places, and on them 'rituals of memory' were practiced (Ali 1992, 31-35). Old Dongola is such a place. For the local inhabitants this is the 'logic of inhabitation' (to use Tim Ingold's term) and such places are given a status similar to a cemetery. But the meaning of such spaces was also never fixed and could be turned into completely different interpretations. This dynamic is particularly visible in urban centres where, because of rapid urbanisation processes, there is an urgent need for every empty piece of land.

Historical Soba does not have a significant place in a memory structure. Unlike the villages of northern Sudan, the founders of the Nubian Kingdom of Alwa are not considered as real ancestors and, in any event, most of the inhabitants are relatively new arrivals here. Our investigation in schools⁴ has shown a very coherent concept of the past that comprises Kushite elements mixed with popular Islamic culture. The history of Alwa is on the margin of the schools' teaching curricula. In spite of this, the archaeological site of Soba has been given a special status by the local population. It is undoubtedly the result of the rural character of the local culture that is crucial for preserving 'traditional' cultural values. The remains of Soba belong to the deserted category and are protected by tradition – the so-called *harab* or even *maskun* ('cursed'), as opposed to *amar*, an area inhabited by people. Using the language

⁴During the fieldwork, visits to two primary schools were made, both in close proximity to the archeological site. The first is named 'The Soba Kingdom' and is a private and co-educational facility. The second, 'al-Gen'ab school', is a public institution and attended only by girls. During our visits we delivered short lectures on the archaeology and history of Soba. Schoolgirls from the public school were asked to prepare drawings on a paper dedicated to archaeological sites of Sudan. Later they also prepared short stories, the so-called *hujja* which they had been told at home by their mothers or grandmothers.

of structural anthropology, we can speak of a series of oppositions: *haram-halal*, spiritual-human, hot-cold, empty-developed... Today we can add to that list more notions such as: clean-dirty (in the sense of all kinds of trash and excrement), central-peripheral, residential-agricultural, safety-danger – this last one, in the case of Soba, is a result of the nocturnal consumption of alcohol and drugs, as well as the presence of thieves and tramps.

All these transgressive practices, as Masquelier (2002, 881) has already noticed in the case of the African roads, transform the site into a place of fear, but also offers a fascination or even an opportunity. The ambiguity of this place is intensified by the contention of death. The archaeological site is said to be one big burial place – *terra morta*. This belief is based on the constant and numerous discoveries of human bones in the area and the narratives that accompany them. Finally, the archaeological site remains a magical space, to which various supernatural forces have taken a special liking. They guard the secrets of this place from the robbers of the past. Their common denominator is the space-time of the night, the liminal times such as dusk, midnight or a time just before dawn in particular. The belief in the phenomenon called *ablemba* seems to be quite common, for example. This mirage, meaning ‘light’ or ‘lamp’, probably originated from the world of nomads, draws people away from homes or popular routes.

Other types of narratives are also being created. On the one hand, it is the result of ‘memorising’, on the other, the accelerating urbanisation processes, but also the latest archaeological work. Over the past centuries, Soba was a reservoir of building material (mainly of the characteristic red bricks). Many interviewees mentioned the Governor General’s palace in Khartoum was built from the demolition of the ruins of the Nubian capital. Later, during the period of European imperialism, Soba became a source for archaeological monuments (Drzewiecki and Ryndziejewicz 2019, 317). Thus the objects, according to the residents, were carried away by foreigners, including archaeologists.

For the inhabitants, Soba is a kind of natural resource that is subjected to systematic exploitation, with the difference being perhaps that no bricks are quarried today. These days the land has become a natural resource, significantly lying in the suburbs of the largest Sudanese urban centre. In the 20th century, the area closest to the river was transformed into arable fields, and at the beginning of the 21st century, farmers (primarily large landowners) managed to gain possession of new plots of surrounding land. Part of the land was purchased (although contrary to the law on the protection of monuments), while some farmers were only granted permission for use, provided that there were no monuments. Others, in turn, appropriated land for cultivation using the *fait accompli* method.

Brick posts were created to mark the site boundary, followed by wire fences. These, however, began to move, a metre or two each year. The fields are leveled using heavy machinery and intensively irrigated. As a result, the once hilly terrain has become flat and cleared of all archaeological material visible on the ground.

The ‘Soba past’ is today the axis of dispute, in which problems such as land rights, group identity or cultural heritage resound (just to mention the most important). The actors in the dispute, apart from the local community, are archaeologists, landowners and businessmen, as well as representatives of the Sudanese authorities. It is worth adding that the dispute temperature is being further animated by the political changes currently taking place in Sudan.

Our research indicates that Soba is an object of memory and non-memory alike. In particular among the representatives of elite groups (former traditional leaders, few intelligentsia) and those belonging to well-established inhabitants (Mugarba Arabs), we can talk about some sort of a pride. It is enough to mention that one of the local primary schools is called ‘the Kingdom of Soba’. Briefly, the reason for this pride is the fact the ‘today Soba’ lies in the place of the former capital of the Nubian kingdom, the heart of an entire country. The memory of the ‘Soba past’ is reconstructed through the legend discussed below. This form of narrative seems to be used because of the lack of ‘authentic memories’, and popular and understandable topics were woven into it. History and memory are two different ways of referencing the past. History is a discourse of professionals, an official tale. Memory, in turn, is what you have seen with our own eyes, or heard from previous generations, or as some prefer, carried by a ‘folk lute’. For this type of relationship with the past: gesture, symbol, image or myth are particularly important (Nora 2009, 4-12; Goody 2012, 112-132). An example of this type of reference to the past, is what we have called ‘the legend of Ajoba’, the story of a woman who brought about the decline of Soba (*Ajoba al-khrabt Soba*). Ajoba was the queen of Soba (according to other versions, alternatively a witch or simply an ordinary woman). All, however, agree that she had a beautiful daughter named Tayiba, whose hand many nearby kings sought in marriage. However, Ajoba

was greedy and deceitful. Not only did she demand a great amount of gold from each candidate, but also that each subsequent competitor should kill the previous one. Many men died in this way, and chaos reigned in the country. In the end, however, someone discovered the secret of the queen, and the surrounding tribes, with the Funj and Abdallab at the forefront, united and attacked Soba.

What does this story, extremely popular in Sudan, in fact tell us? In part, it can be considered a legend, in part also, a fairy tale. The legend in the case of African communities most often takes the form of clan or dynastic history. It can also be woven into the canvas of some groundbreaking event, such as the capture and fall of Soba (Goody 2012, 192). In oral societies it was often believed that an effective historical record must be a poem and requires musical accompaniment. In Sudan this function is still performed by the village bards playing a sort of lyre called a *tambur*. In a way, it can also be considered a fairy tale, i.e. a story intended for children and having the character of a warning. Sudanese fairy tales are invariably educational. They present a kind of distorted mirror, sharply depicting good and bad human qualities. Modesty, truthfulness, kindness, respect for elders are among the most common moral references in Sudan's 'children's stories'. In rural areas women used to tell them to their underage audience during the evenings. Night is the *sine qua non* condition for these types of performances. For breaking this taboo supernatural sanctions threaten. These stories, taking a variety of forms from verbal riddles to fairy tales, are called *hujja* – 'wisdom' (Abdulla 1955, 65-69).

The phrase 'Ajoba destroyed Soba' is used when someone (especially if it is a woman) does something highly destructive. A misogynic element might be seen here. A woman was the cause of the fall of an entire kingdom. She may be a secret, treacherous element, and her beauty and charm usually become her weapons. She is beautiful and appealing, but at the same time creates chaos; she can become evil, even demonic. This model of femininity seems to be very popular in Sudanese folklore (Abdulla 1953, Kennedy 1978).

Perhaps this story is also a commentary on the expansion of Arabs and gradual adoption of Islam in Sudan which came about through marriages and conversion from a matrilineal to a patrilineal system. This story may also contain a hidden motive as to why the Arabs conquered Soba. Yusuf Fadl Hasan (2005, 132-133), relying on an oral and written tradition, mentions that the Arabs became united under the leadership of the Abdallab to oppose the tyranny of the 'Kings of Anaj'. It was thought to be a tyranny in the sense of foreign jurisdiction and, most importantly, of Christian power, but also of power *per se*, exercising its usual prerogatives, such as taxes. This interpretation is supported by the symbolic layer in the story. The story of Ajoba symbolizing archaism, is in opposition to the present and to civilization (this motif can be also easily found in Sudanese folklore). The killing of Ajoba and the conquest of Soba can be read as a transition, and 'the end of wilderness'.

Summary

The fieldwork at Soba conducted in 2019-2020 has provided a massive amount of data on the spatial organization of the capital city of the Kingdom of Alwa, in keeping with the main objectives of the three-year project. The combination of aerial photography, geophysical prospection and targeted excavations seems to work well. In addition, the documentation, numerous samples and small finds collected throughout the fieldwork will make new studies on various aspects of life and death in medieval Soba possible.

During the fieldwork, approaches have been made to involve the local community in the research and to identify stakeholders in disputes on the preservation of the local archaeological heritage. The initial ethnological survey provided interesting insights into this subject, hence the same approach will continue to be used in the next season of fieldwork.

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