

# SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



*Bulletin No. 11*

2007





Egypt

RED SEA

Sudan

Eritrea

Ethiopia

ASWAN  
1st cataract

Aniba  
Qasr Ibrim

WADI HALFA  
2nd cataract

3rd cataract  
Tombos  
Tabo

Kawa

Jebel Barkal  
4th cataract

ABU HAMED

5th cataract

Dangeil

Akad  
ATBARA

6th cataract

OMDURMAN  
Khartoum  
Soba East

Botri

WAD MEDANI

KOSTI

SENNAR

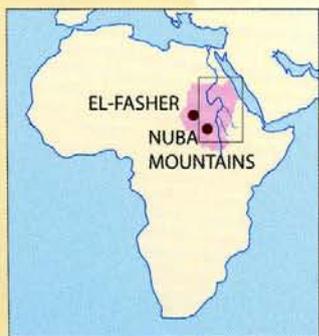
KASSALA

GEDAREF

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society Concession

▲ Ancient sites

● MODERN TOWNS



N

0 250 km

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The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



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Front cover: Village on the Island of Dirbi in the SARS concession above the Fourth Nile Cataract (photo: D. A. Welsby).

## The Sultan Ali Dinar Museum, el-Fasher. A window on Darfur's history

*Pieter Tesch*

The Sultan Ali Dinar Palace Museum in el-Fasher (Plates 1 and 2), the historical capital of the Sultanate of *Dar Fur*<sup>1</sup> and now the state capital of North Darfur, is not only important as a provincial museum, but also houses a nice collection of antiquities from the Middle Nile region. Brought together in this regional museum are collections focussing on the pagan Kushite and Christian Nubian civilisations of the distant past as well as those from the recent past, including the regalia and memorabilia of Sultan Ali Dinar



*Plates 1 and  
2. The Sultan  
Ali Dinar  
Museum.*

(1898-1916)  
(Plates 3 and  
4), the last independent  
monarch of  
*Dar Fur* – the  
Land of the  
Fur. The artefacts from his  
reign clearly illustrate

the character of *Dar Fur* as a Muslim sultanate as well as an African kingdom. In fact, the museum offers a window on the history of Darfur from the region's last mani-



*Plate 3. The Throne room of Sultan Ali Dinar.*

festation as an independent political entity in modern times to its prehistoric roots.

The first European traveller to visit the region and describe it was William George Browne in 1793-1796 (1799). He was trying to follow in the footsteps of James Bruce, who had travelled to the Funj Sultanate and the Blue Nile a few years earlier. However, Browne was not allowed to travel further into the sultanate because of trouble with its vassals in Kordofan who had allied themselves with the Funj. As a result he was confined to el-Fasher at the foot of Jebel Marra (Edwards 2004, 272; Insoll 2003, 131; Udal 1998, 119-125).<sup>2</sup>



*Plate 4. Memorabilia from the period of the Dar Fur Sultanate on display in the Ali Dinar Museum.*

Ali Dinar was the last independent sultan of *Dar Fur*. He was killed by a British military expedition in 1916 after he heeded the call for *jihad* by the Ottoman Sultan against the British. He had been angered by Anglo-French negotiations

<sup>1</sup> El-Fashir was founded as a permanent capital around AD 1791-92 (AH 1206).

<sup>2</sup> *Fasher* or *Fashir* can refer to the 'palace' or the court in front of the palace.



over disputed territory between Wadai and Darfur after annexation of this area by the French. This region was one over which the *Dar Fur* sultans traditionally had claimed suzerainty.

Ali Dinar Zakariya, a member of the Keira clan that had ruled the Fur people since the late 16<sup>th</sup> – early 17<sup>th</sup> century, fought in the battle of Omdurman on the Kerari plain in 1898 among the troops from Darfur of the Khalifa Abdallahi Mohammed el-Ta'ishi. Having survived the slaughter, he managed to make his way back to Darfur. In agreement with the remnants of Madhist forces there, he was proclaimed sultan. He was the grandson of an earlier Fur sultan, Mohammed al-Fadl. His grandfather, despite losing the conflict with Mohammed Ali for Kordofan in the 1820s during the Turco-Egyptian conquest of Sudan, had managed to avert, for the Fur Sultanate, the fate of the Funj Sultanate in the Nile Valley. *Dar Fur* was eventually incorporated into the *Turkiyya* in 1874 after the Khedive Ismail felt he needed to curb the powers of Zubeir Pasha in the west. Following the Fashoda crisis in 1899, Britain and France could not agree about the border between their newly acquired possessions in the central and eastern parts of the historical *Bilad al-Sudan*, the future Chad and Sudan, from the Nile-Congo watershed northwards into the Sahara. As a result, *Dar Fur* was allowed to become independent with Ali Dinar as sultan, recognising nominally the Anglo-Egyptian authority in Khartoum (Udal 2005, 381, 442, 477, 491, 533; Holt and Daly 2000, 88-91, 93, 96, 110-111).

Following the ravages of the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sultan Ali Dinar reconstructed the capital el-Fasher, restored family tombs and enclosed sites at Tora in the Fur heartland of Jebel Marra, and reburied one of his predecessors, Sultan Zachariah Ali, in a *qubba* in el-Fasher (Plate 5). The affection of the Fur people for Jebel Marra is still enormous and Tora is regarded as their spiritual home. Apart from the palace of Ali Dinar, the *qubba* of Zachariah Ali is one of the few remaining historic structures left in el-Fasher. There is also a former arsenal constructed of mud brick, which is still being used as a women's prison and is, therefore, in danger of alteration as new structures are being built within it and without.

Ali Dinar built a new palace for himself in the style of the colonial villas constructed in Khartoum after 1898. It has very thick walls to keep the heat out and overlooks the seasonal lake in the centre of the town that is fed by *wadis* during the rainy season. The building that now houses the museum was constructed by specialist builders from the Nile Valley and master craftsmen from Egypt between 1911 and 1912. However, in spite of its name, it was not actually Ali Dinar's residence, but his seat of government, with the throne hall, at its centre. This has been restored to its former glory and now functions as the main gallery for Ali Dinar's regalia and memorabilia (Plates 3 and 4).

Ali Dinar's private residence consisted of a traditional Fur compound of *tukls* (round mud houses) and a square,



Plate 5. The *qubba* of Sultan Zachariah Ali built by Ali Dinar.

thatched building, divided into three, housing his private rooms, that was located at the side of the palace. In between the compound of the private residence and the palace was a square, flat-roofed mud and fired-brick building, known as the coffee house, where the Sultan informally met his advisers and traditional rulers and chiefs of the Fur as well as allied peoples from outside the capital. It was here that he made himself available to petitioners and supplicants (Plates 6 and 7).



Plate 6. The view from the palace of the 'coffee house' and the thatched *tukls* (behind it), the private residence of Sultan Ali Dinar.



Plate 7. Interior of the main quarters of Sultan Ali Dinar in the square, thatched, mud-brick building of his private residence.

It is no coincidence that the museum was opened in 1977 during a temporary cessation of the civil war in the south and a time of national reconciliation and cooperation (Plate 8). Sultan Ali Dinar is a national hero in modern Sudan both for having fought the British in the Mahdist army and as the last independent sultan of *Dar Fur*. He is also a potent symbol for the special identity of the Fur people within Sudan as well.



Plate 8. The museum's curator Mamoun Mohamed Mussa.

### Acknowledgements

I wish to thank for their kind cooperation Mr Hassan Hussein Idris, Director-General of the National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums (NCAM), and Mr Abdul Rahman Ali, Director of the Sudan National Museum in Khartoum. In particular, I am grateful to Mr Mamoun

Mohamed Mussa, regional director of NCAM in Darfur, and the Keira Clan (Plate 9) for the hospitality extended to me during my stay in el-Fasher during April 2007.

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Plate 9. Haram at age 95; one of the two last surviving daughters of Sultan Ali Dinar at the Keira clan gathering on 20 April 2007.