

# SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



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Front cover: The descendency of Tomb IV T 1 near Sedeinga under excavation (© V. Francigny / SEDAU).

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# Jawgul – A Village Between Towers

*Mariusz Drzewiecki and Piotr Maliński*

## Introduction

The village of Jawgul is located in the Third Cataract area, just below the point where the Nile turns towards the east. Here the main river flow encircles Arduan Island from the west and north and splits further creating a number of smaller, rocky islands. One of these is Jawgulnarti (in March 2003 it measured approx. 1.8 x 0.3km). It lies alongside the left bank from which it is separated by a narrow channel that fills with water when the river runs high. Jawgul village lies both on this seasonal island and the left bank of the Nile (Plate 1).

Nubians from the Mahas group inhabit the village.<sup>1</sup> Their ethnic territory stretches from the Dongola Reach to Jebel Doshā downstream from the Third Cataract (Osman and Edwards 2012, 6-7). The Mahas regard themselves as indigenous to the area, they have their own language (Nobiin<sup>2</sup>), culture and traditions, and together with Islam took on a

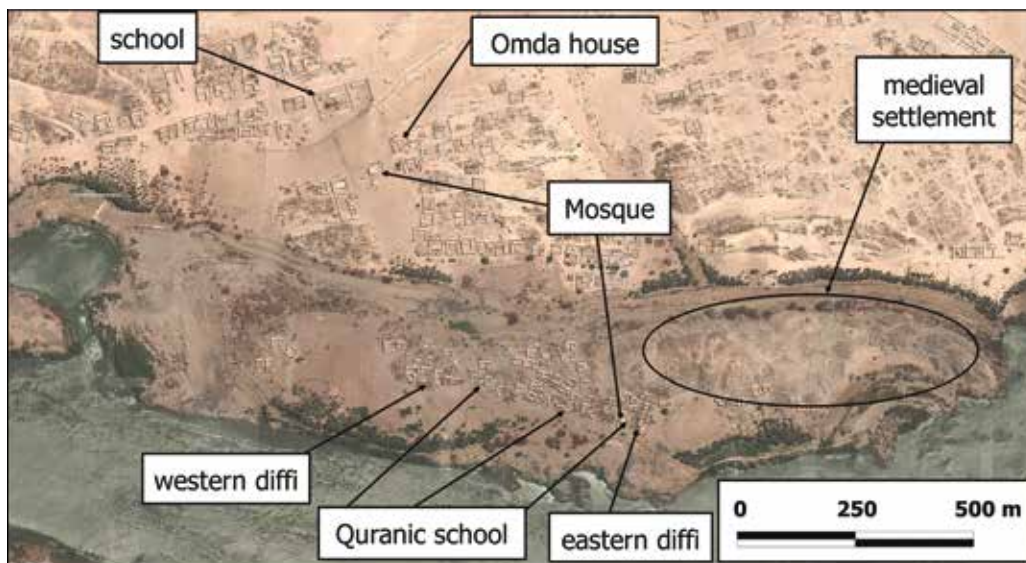


Plate 1. *Jawgul village in 2012.*

range of elements from Arab culture.<sup>3</sup> Their traditional economy is based on intensive agriculture using irrigation, supplemented by animal husbandry, fishing, crafts and trade (Herzog 1957, 135-162; Sana Mohamed Ahmed Al-

<sup>1</sup> Osman and Edwards (2012, 21) state that there are also “significant ‘Arab’ settlements” in Jawgul, present since the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which influenced the “complex settlement patterns”. According to the statistical data they cited from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ‘Arabs’ made up 3% of the Mahas population at that time.

<sup>2</sup> M. Bechhaus-Gerst has written a linguistic-historical monograph on Nobiin (2011). A dictionary of the language spoken by the inhabitants of the Mahas region has also been published (Khalil and Jakobiński 1996).

<sup>3</sup> The majority of Mahas are bilingual; the first (spoken) language is Nobiin, the second (spoken and written) is Arabic (Griffiths 1955).

Batal 1994a; 1994b). Nowadays, seasonal work outside of Sudan, particularly in the Arab States of the Persian Gulf, plays an important economic role in the Mahas community (Bilal 2006). In relation to the Mahas population as a whole (in Sudan and beyond), which is currently estimated at approximately 47,000, Jawgul is one of the smaller village communities on the left bank of the Nile – in 1990 there were 600 inhabitants (Osman and Edwards 2012, 20). Even so, the village has its own *omda*, one of 45 *omdas* in the whole of the Mahas region (Plate 1).

This paper presents the post-medieval history of Jawgul from two perspectives. The first is based on an ethnological study of the villagers and the second on archaeological observations. The result will show two images of the past. Will they overlap or be complementary? Or will they be totally incongruent?

## Jawgul’s past according to the oral tradition of its inhabitants

Jawgul is a region rich in material remains of the past. Many, well-preserved ancient buildings can be seen in the landscape (Plates 2 and 3). The past has also left intangible heritage

in the form of oral traditions which exist within the local community. Contained within is knowledge of the past, preserved in memory and passed down from generation to generation. It seems that in regards to the distant past (which is beyond the reach of living memory) a key role in the creation of a traditional vision/concept of the past is filled by the ruined buildings and other structures mentioned earlier. Therefore, tradition is a popular interpretation of their incidence and current state (Osman 1992). In the

case of the inhabitants of Jawgul, the situation is rather more complicated – their traditional views and ideas are overlapped by historical knowledge, gained during formal education and in some cases also scientific knowledge from earlier researchers carrying out fieldwork in the village and the surrounding area (Hashim and Bell 2000; Osman and Edwards 2012). The discrepancies which emerge between this data inevitably lead to a certain confusion and disorientation. In this context it is not surprising that many of Jawgul’s inhabitants, when questioned about the past (especially the distant past), choose to hide behind a veil of ignorance. It also seems possible that there is some mistrust of strangers inquiring about the region’s past at a time when its future is uncertain (in the context of the proposed hydroelectric



Plate 2. Eastern diffi,  
site JWG020  
(photo. A. Misiurny).

Plate 3. Eastern diffi,  
mosque's minaret visible on the  
left side; white plastered building  
attached to fortifications is  
now adapted as a room for a  
married couple (photo.  
M. Drzewiecki).



power station at Kajbar, the building of which entails flooding part of the Mahas region).

Despite these difficulties, fieldwork carried out in January and February 2013 obtained a certain image of the past from the villagers. It is quite a clear picture as far as the recent past is concerned; however, it becomes increasingly blurred and vague as we go further back in time. The ancient times are associated with paganism – it is thought that the Sun, animals, rocks and stone idols were then worshipped. Some of the Jawgul villagers believe that the ancient pagans were of enormous height (this is a common belief held across the Middle Nile Valley). Proof of this is meant to be the dimensions of the old buildings, which are seen as the work of these pagan-giants. According to some, the remains of this 'pagan' architecture were destroyed for some reason – perhaps they simply collapsed or were ruined in long-forgotten battles and wars. The buildings which have survived in a better condition are thought to be the work of Christians who supposedly lived in the region after the pagans. Some of these buildings are viewed as places of religious cult, for example churches (*kafriinkisse*). The Jawgul villagers appreciate the architecture

of these buildings, emphasising the fact that such solid and high buildings are no longer built in the village. Some of the ruins are regarded as dangerous places for they are allegedly inhabited by supernatural beings (*jinn*) – such beliefs are typical of Arabic-Islamic culture (Kriss and Kriss-Heinrich 1969, 15-18).

Post-Christian times in the oral tradition are associated with the remains of *diffi* (Figures 1 and 2, Plates 2 and 3) – fortified sites<sup>4</sup> (Edwards 2003, 54). The Jawgul villagers identify two types of such buildings: forts and watchtowers. Some inhabitants are of the opinion that the forts on the banks of the Nile were in visual contact with each other. Where neighbouring forts were not 'in visual range' it was decided to build the watchtowers (*kidinjam*) between them in order to pass on any signals. The villagers imagine such signals were in the form of coloured light or coloured smoke from fires lit at the highest point of the forts and towers. How the smoke and flames were in fact coloured is believed to be a

<sup>4</sup> Adams (1987, 338-339) in reference to this type of building in the Abri-Delgo region, which usually had an additional residential building within, applied the term *kourfa*.

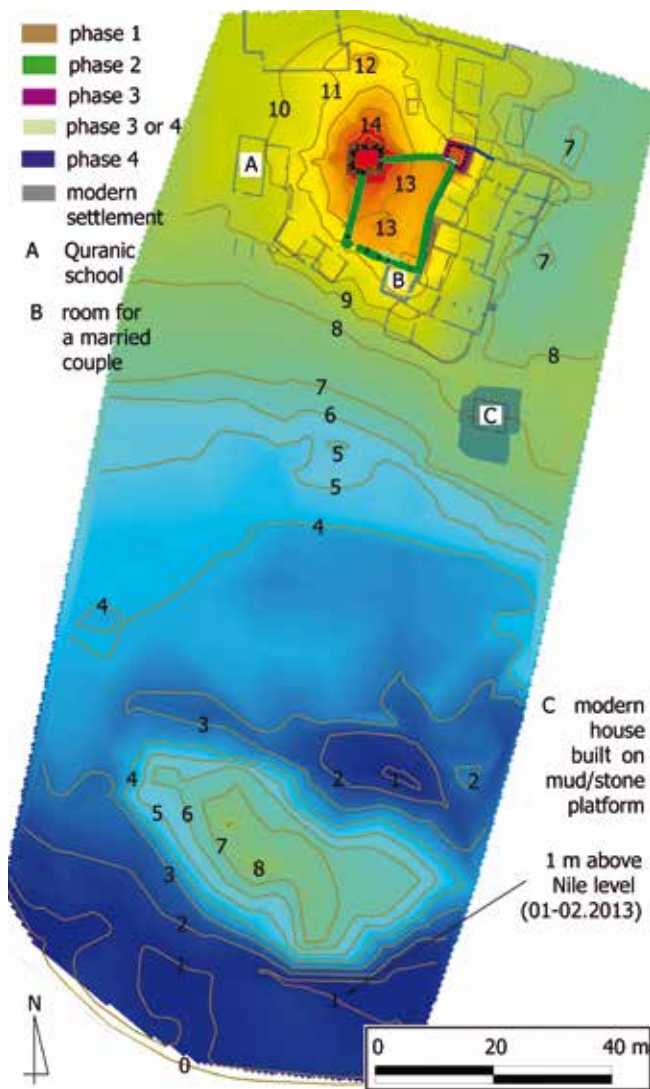


Figure 1. Plan of the eastern diffi (drawn by M. Drzewiecki).

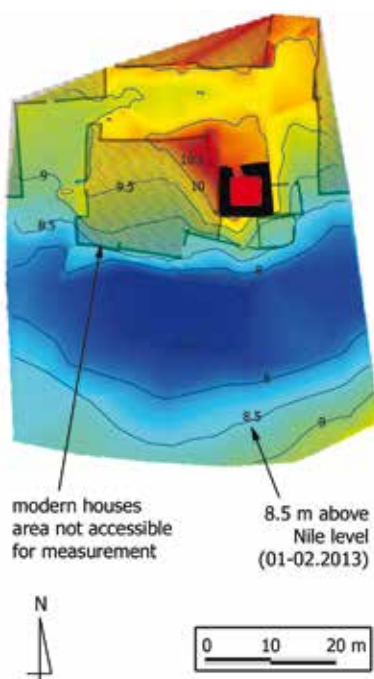


Figure 2. Plan of the western diffi (drawn by M. Drzewiecki, A. Misiurny and M. Brzezińska).

forgotten secret, though it is thought that for purposes of communication two or three colours were used.

The inhabitants of Jawgul appear to recognise that their Nubian ancestors were Christian, as well as their predecessors. Their pride at such ethnicity is visible in their appreciation of their own culture – especially in the context of its past significance. For example, the Nobiin language is regarded as ‘the mother of all languages’ - therefore supposedly the oldest language in the world. Similarly, the waterwheel (*eskale*), also considered to be an ancient Nubian invention, is the “mother of all machines” from which all other, more complex mechanical devices originated. According to the locals, the introduction of the waterwheel developed farming in the river valley and this then became the economic foundation for the growth of the Nubian kingdoms. The craftsmanship of the old buildings – especially the fortresses which are far larger than any buildings currently constructed in the region – is taken as visible proof of these prosperous times.

Another important building for the inhabitants of Jawgul is the mosque on Jawgulnarti (Plates 1 and 3). It is a material trace of the changes in the religious system in Nubia and the spread of Islam (Amira Omer Siddig Osman 2004, 108-113). When asked how long the mosque had been standing the locals were unable to give a clear date, claiming only that it is very, very old and was already in existence when the oldest inhabitants were children. Other old buildings, preserved on the island and connected directly with Islam, are the Qur'anic schools. In this context Islam seems to be a religion inseparably connected to education – for in order to read the Quran it is necessary to be able to understand Arabic. A Qur'anic school (*khalwa*) was, therefore, built on the island in which the religious scholars instilled the language and the contents of the holy book in the students (Plates 1 and 4). A little later two more schools (Figures 3 and 4, Plate 1) were built (each larger than the one before). When the schools were in use, Jawgul was famous as a centre for religious education – many imams from various villages across the whole of the



Plate 4. The smallest Qur'anic school on Jawgulnarti, located between the eastern diffi and the mosque (photo A. Misiurny).

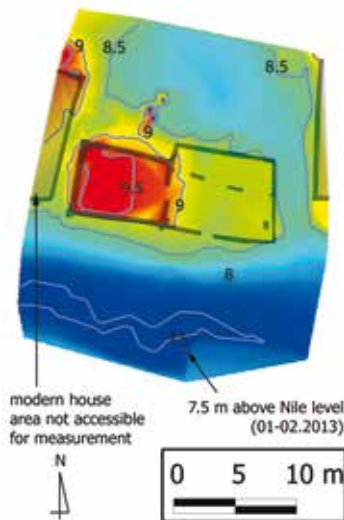


Figure 3. Plan of the second Quranic school (drawn by M. Drzewiecki, A. Misiurny and M. Brzezińska).

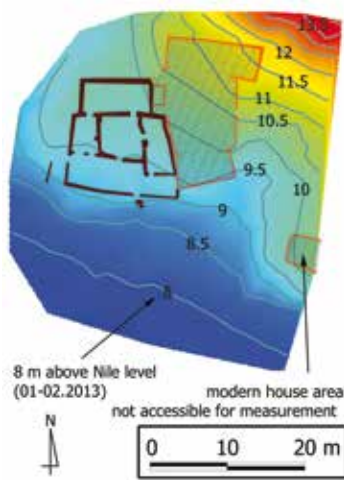


Figure 4. Plan of the biggest Quranic school (drawn by M. Drzewiecki, A. Misiurny and M. Brzezińska).

Mahas region received their training there. According to the villagers, the Quranic schools closed around 1966 due to the opening of formal education centres in the area – a primary school in Arduan in 1954, and in Jawgul itself in 1975 (Plate 1). The teaching staff at the new school began to draw the intellectual elite of the village – young people, educated in middle and higher schools further afield.

In the 1960s other changes began to occur in the traditional economy, which were reflected very clearly in the layout of the village. In terms of technology, the greatest change in farming was the introduction of diesel pumps in place of the waterwheels powered by draught animals. As a result it became possible to increase the acreage for farming, thereby increasing farming productivity (Barbour 1959; Hartmann and Hartvig 1978, 23). Furthermore, new opportunities arose to earn money by travelling abroad for seasonal work. These economic changes improved the material status of the villagers and additionally led to an increase in population. Those Mahas returning from working abroad had a different perspective on the rules and regulations in place in Jawgul society.<sup>5</sup> As a result the village settlement started to be

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that Mahas communities also settled in other regions of Sudan – in particular in the capital city (Jackson 1919; Herzog 1957,

transferred from the island (where there was a shortage of space) to the left bank of the Nile. To summarize, before the 1960s the left bank was uninhabited. The entire settlement was concentrated on the island. As the village expanded so new forms of building appeared – farms became more extensive (the characteristic issues of the restrictions and shape of the terrain were no longer problematic), modern building materials (cement, corrugated metal sheeting, steel pipes, etc.) were introduced. New public buildings were constructed in the growing village: a mosque and large primary school (together with a smaller pre-school) close to the house of the *omda* (Plate 1). Those living on the left bank now have the additional convenience of running water thanks to the water tower and mains supply. Further development can be seen in the 1990s when a farming project on the edge of the village was conducted. The newly constructed irrigation system (on a scale and reach never before seen) enabled irrigation of a large area of alluvium and palaeochannel (Osman and Edwards 2012, 13, 241).

### The *diffi* and the expansion of the village – an archaeological perspective

Observation of the architecture and position of the buildings in Jawgul indicates differences and similarities between the settlement on the bank and on the island. Buildings on the left bank are more ordered. Individual houses are built roughly in the shape of a rectangle or square and cover a larger surface area (Plate 1). In the 1990s<sup>6</sup> most of the houses were located along the ‘roads’ which cut across the village on the left bank. Expansion was dynamic and now the location of the houses is no longer dependent on the main roads.<sup>7</sup> At present there are also buildings further away, some distance from the built-up area. Public buildings and the houses of inhabitants who hold important positions in village administration are grouped together. The primary school, mosque, headmaster’s house and the house of the village *omda* are all close to each other (Plate 1).

On the island, modern settlement is mainly located in the area between two defensive buildings called *diffi* (Edwards 2004, 275-276). According to oral tradition this is the oldest part of the entire Jawgul village. Individual buildings can also be found in other parts of the island. By comparing satellite images (from 2003, 2011 and 2012) and aerial photographs (from the 1990s) it is possible to state that the expansion of the village on the island during this period was not as dynamic as the urbanisation process on the river bank.

The buildings in the area between the towers (approximately 430m in a direct line) are compact and the houses there have an irregular layout (Figure 1, Plates 1 and 2). They often follow the topography of the land. According to the Mahas,

163-174; Lobban 1983). Contact between Jawgul villagers and these communities may also have led to cultural patterns from outside the local area being introduced.

<sup>6</sup> Analysis of aerial photographs taken by the Sudan Survey Department.

<sup>7</sup> Observation of satellite images available on Google Earth.



these buildings were often rebuilt and this becomes obvious upon closer analysis of the architecture. When a man from one of the houses married, an existing room was adapted for the couple's use. However, if this was not possible, the house was slightly extended. The lack of space on the island, according to the inhabitants, was a big problem. The majority of modern houses in Jawgulnarti were built by the grandfathers and great-grandfathers of the present-day villagers. Some are still lived-in, others are slowly falling into ruin.

There are now three buildings which were once Quranic schools on the island (Plate 1). According to the villagers, the oldest and smallest is to be found between the east *diffi* and the mosque and is now used as a storehouse (Figure 1). The remaining two schools are currently disused. One is approximately 120m west of the oldest and is larger (Figure 3). The third is located approximately 180m further west of school no. 2 and it is the largest of the three (Figure 4). The Arabic writing engraved into its walls bears dates from 1980 to 2006. Most, but not all, of the villagers believe it to be the newest of the three schools.

Some of the Nubians of Jawgul supported this chronological order of the schools by stressing the differences in the shape of the entrance to each of the buildings. In the oldest building the door jambs were concave (Plate 4). According to our informants they had been worn away by the people entering whose custom it was to place their hands on either side of the entrance for support when crossing the threshold. The door jamb in school no. 2 showed less wear (Plate 5) and the newest school had the narrowest entrance (Plate 6).



Plate 5. Entrance to one of the Quranic schools on the island. According to Mahas people from Jawgul this is the second oldest school in the area (photo A. Misiurny).

The entrances to each of the three schools are on the side of the road which connects the east and west *diffi* (Figure 1). It seems that this road forms the axis of the settlement on the island and all the significant and public buildings were positioned along it. The tradition of the spatial distribution of houses along roads could have been carried over to the left bank.

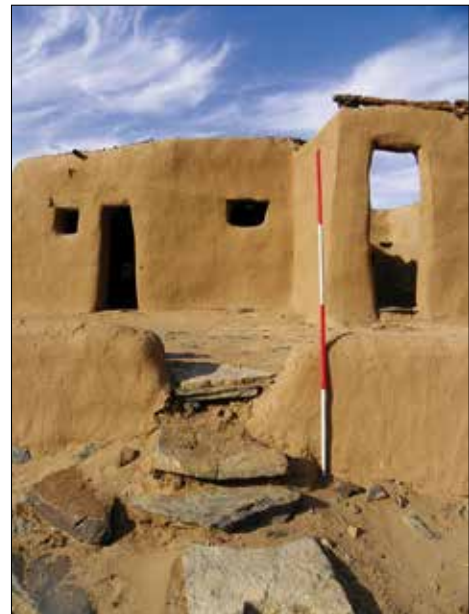


Plate 6. Entrance to the biggest Quranic school on Jawgulnarti (photo A. Misiurny).

There is one mosque on the island. It is located near the east *diffi*. The oldest Quranic school is also in this neighbourhood. The concentration of public buildings is clearly visible – as it is now in Jawgul on the left bank. Is this a settlement pattern? Did this arrangement of buildings on the bank originate from the past layout functioning on Jawgulnarti? If so, then perhaps the houses of villagers who held high positions in the administration were also located on the island? Is it possible that, in the past, the *omda's* headquarters was the eastern *diffi*? It is a small fortified site set on a rocky hill, with two towers, which still today rise above the surrounding houses (Figure 1). This site is registered as JWG020 in the records made as part of the Mahas Survey Project (Osman and Edwards 2012, 246).

The *diffi* is almost a trapezium in shape and covers about 190m<sup>2</sup>. The towers are in the corners to the north west and north east (Figure 1, Plates 2 and 3). In the south-western corner, from the roadside, there is a small, simple entrance leading inside the enclosure (Plate 7). By the south-eastern corner stands a building which has been adapted as a room for a married couple but, according to the villagers, in the past it was part of the *diffi* – some believe that it was once the prison (Figure 1, Plate 3). Inside the enclosure there are no traces of old buildings (Plate 7). In the south-eastern corner a modern extension to the married quarters serves as a bathroom. Next to this are some heavily damaged steps leading to the upper parts of the alleged prison. The remaining interior area of the *diffi* is currently used as a rubbish dump. Animal dung can be seen on the surface which may indicate that this area was once used as a pen, though this was not confirmed during our archaeological survey.

The fortifications were built using the *jalous* technique together with irregular stones in the lower section of the walls



Plate 7. Eastern diffi from inside. Close to the right corner a simple entrance is visible. In the left corner there is a small, modern building used as an additional bathroom for the married-couple room located outside. The bathroom partly overbuilds remains of stairs (photo A. Misiurny).



Plate 8. Western diffi. It was built from stone and mud brick; after heavy damage, renovated using jalous technique (photo A. Misiurny).

(Plate 2). The architecture is in a good state of preservation; the highest parts of the north-western tower stand up to 7m. Architectonic analysis indicated at least four expansion phases occurred on this site (Figure 1). The first phase saw the construction of the tower on the top of the rocky hill. The surrounding wall was added later which meant the original building then became the north-western corner tower. The second corner tower (north-eastern) was built in phase three. This tower has collapsed at least once. When it was rebuilt it was, together with the building which leans against the fortification on the eastern side, directly beyond the walls. This extra-mural building has undergone numerous extensions and rebuilding and is currently disused. The family which once lived here has moved to the left bank. The expansion of the fortification from phase 1-3 may have occurred within a short time, perhaps even as it was being completed in one phase further extensions were already under way.

It is difficult to set an exact date for this site. A few fragments of ceramic vessels have been found on the surface. Some of these are the remains of fired, red bowls and plates with a painted decoration. The slits in the walls of the towers and around the entrance to the *diffi* may indicate that firearms were used to defend the approaches to the walls. In summary, then, the fortress dates to the post-medieval period. How long was it in use? If it was the headquarters of the *omda* then perhaps the last one lived there or in the building erected directly outside the fortification in the 1950s. Attempts to find the answer to these issues will be made in the second field season using ethnological interviews as the method of research.

The solutions presented above are only hypothetical regarding the importance of the eastern *diffi*. In the western

part of the village the ruins of a tower (western *diffi*) can be seen; its location and significance remain unexplained at this time (Plates 1 and 8). The area around the tower is relatively flat and so it is currently densely built-up; the remains of the tower are the only trace of past architecture here (Plate 9). They now form part of one household and are used as a storehouse where, for example, firewood<sup>8</sup> is kept. The tower is built on a rectangular plan, 7.7 x 7.5m, and is about 5m high. The lower part of the building is made of irregular



Plate 9. The western diffi is part of a modern dwelling (photo A. Misiurny).

stones set in mud mortar (up to approx 3m high) followed by mud bricks (about 2m). The building has been seriously damaged at least once (Plate 8) and the villagers have differing opinions as to why. According to one local man, the tower was shelled by a British steamer during the Mahdist revolt. Others claim that the damage was caused by water during floods or torrential rain. Whatever the reason, the tower was rebuilt using mud and the *jalous* technique (Plates 8 and 10). The walls are approximately 2m thick at the base and become much narrower further up as the external stone facing is battered. Where the stone and brick sections meet there is a clear step where the thickness of the wall decreases

<sup>8</sup> Use of a *diffi* as a storehouse in traditional farming in the Mahas region has been described in ethnographic literature (Sana Mohamed Ahmed al-Batal 1994b, 73, 86).



Plate 10. Western diffi from inside (photo A. Misiurny).

to less than 1m. Perhaps this step was the scarcement for the ground floor roof.

Due to the fact that the tower has been used intensively no ceramic fragments were found on the surface. The building bears late-medieval features common to castle-houses (use of stone and mud brick) and some post-medieval *diffi* characteristics (the battered face of the wall). This may indicate that of the two the western *diffi* is the older.

### Conclusion

The interdisciplinary research carried out in Jawgul revealed that the local oral tradition can be a valuable source of information about the past. The 'picture of the past' created as a result of the ethnological research is based on the knowledge of the community now living in the area under investigation. The traditional vision of the past together with the theoretical model (the result of archaeological analysis) shows that both 'images of the past' are complementary.

For example, the oral tradition explains the current layout of the settlement though in regard to the distant past there are no absolute chronological reference points. The villagers did not mention any dates prior to the 1950s. Their accounts are partially supported by the observations gained from a scientific perspective. Archaeological knowledge is detailed by its very nature, whereas the stories told by the Mahas from Jawgul are more general. Oral tradition (from a general perspective) describes the changes in the spatial distribution of buildings in the Jawgul village area. The oldest part of the village is in the centre of the island between the two *diffi* (Figure 1). Ethno-archaeological observations may indicate that the settlement grew from the eastern *diffi* towards the tower (western *diffi*). Site JWG020 may have

been the centre and headquarters of the local administration at this time. This would explain the concentration of public buildings nearby, as in the case of the house of the Jawgul *omda* today. The role of the tower on the western edge of the settlement is currently unclear. The road connecting the two defensive sites was the main thoroughfare on the island which explains the positioning of the most important buildings along it.

It is worth noting that not only is this road a transport axis on the island but it also determines the layout of the village – separating, as it does, the built-up area from the agricultural zone.

In conclusion, taking different viewpoints of the past (the traditional approach and a spatial-archaeological perspective) into account in such research means that the image is more complex and reveals a multi-dimensional character. This is additionally enhanced by the analysis of aerial photography and satellite images. Such an approach seems to be especially useful in regard to the study of the cultural dimension of the area – both in the past and today. Thus, in the case of Sudan's modern history, traditional and archaeological knowledge can be effectively complimentary and create a coherent image of its past.

### Acknowledgements

This paper is based on fieldwork carried out from 17<sup>th</sup> January – 17<sup>th</sup> February 2013 in Jawgul village during the Adam Mickiewicz University (AMU) expedition to Sudan as part of National Corporation for Antiquities and Museums and AMU collaboration programme. The studies were funded by National Science Centre based on decision no. DEC-2012/05/N/HS3/01164. Research was undertaken in the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology concession. Thanks to Dr Bogdan Żurawski for giving us the possibility to perform the research in this region. Thanks also to Dr David N. Edwards for access to aerial photographs and, last but not least, to all the people from Jawgul who helped us in our research.

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## Gabati

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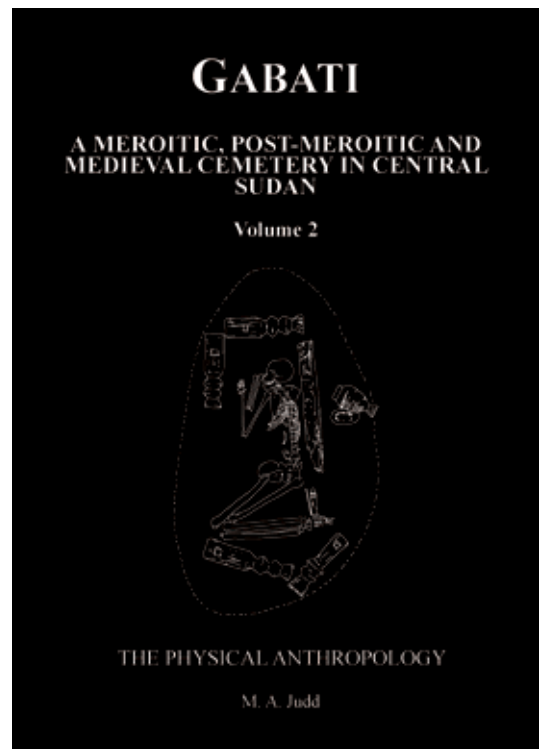
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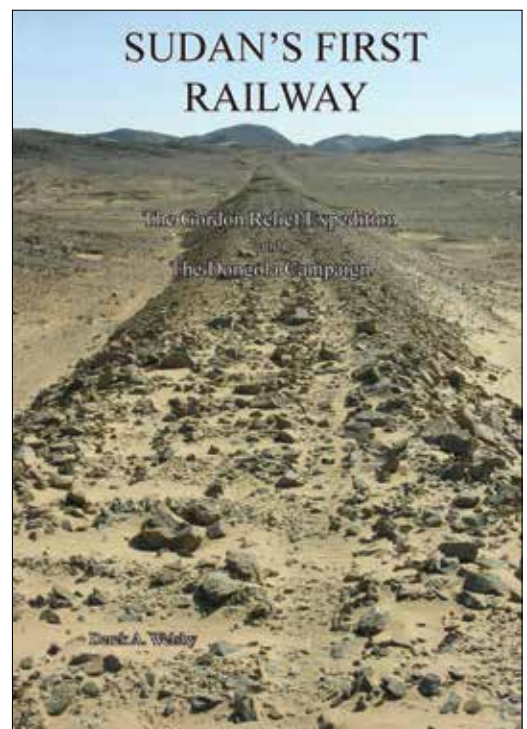
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